HEALTH BASICS

Spiritual healing

Spiritual healing uses prayer, ritual, touch, or spiritual beliefs in hopes of supporting health or recovery.

WHAT IT IS
Practices seeking healing through spiritual belief, prayer, ritual, or energy

WHERE IT COMES UP
Illness, recovery, grief, chronic pain, and palliative care

WHY IT MATTERS
May affect coping, care choices, and treatment decisions

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease, diagnosis, or proven medical treatment

WHO TO ASK
Primary care clinician or hospital spiritual care service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
No medical test; health conditions need standard assessment

Overview

Spiritual healing is a broad term for practices intended to support healing through spiritual or religious means. Examples include prayer, laying on of hands, blessings, rituals, distant healing, Reiki, and practices described as balancing spiritual energy.

There is no single definition or standard method. A practice may be part of an established religion, a cultural tradition, or an independent healing service. Some people take part privately, while others work with a faith leader, spiritual healer, chaplain, or complementary health practitioner.

Spiritual healing is not a disease or diagnosis. It also is not the same as medical treatment. Research has not established spiritual healing as a reliable way to cure disease, remove infection, shrink cancer, repair an injury, or replace medicines and procedures.

Spiritual practices may still be personally meaningful. They can offer comfort, hope, connection, or a way to make sense of illness. These experiences are different from proving that a practice changes the underlying medical condition.

How it works

Different forms of spiritual healing make different claims. Prayer may ask for help from a divine being. A ritual may aim to restore spiritual balance. Reiki and some other practices propose that a practitioner can direct or balance an unseen energy field.

Science has not confirmed the existence of the energy field proposed in Reiki. Claims involving divine or supernatural action also cannot usually be measured in the same way as a medicine, blood test, or surgical procedure.

Research on intercessory prayer-prayer offered for another person's health-has not shown a clear, dependable effect on medical outcomes. Studies of Reiki and related energy practices have also not established effectiveness for treating a health condition. Some studies report changes in pain, anxiety, or well-being, but results are inconsistent and can be affected by small study sizes, weak comparisons, and participants knowing which treatment they received.

A spiritual healing session may still influence how someone feels during or shortly after it. Possible contributors include:

These effects can matter to quality of life. They do not show that a disease has been treated or that medical follow-up is no longer needed.

- Quiet time and relaxation
- Supportive human attention
- Touch, when wanted and appropriate
- Hope and positive expectations
- A sense of meaning, belonging, or connection
- Support from a religious or cultural community

Why it matters for your health

Spiritual beliefs can shape how you understand illness, make decisions, cope with uncertainty, and choose who you want involved in your care. For some people, spiritual support is an important part of care during cancer treatment, serious illness, rehabilitation, grief, or the end of life.

Spiritual care is not necessarily spiritual healing. Spiritual care usually means listening to your beliefs, values, fears, sources of meaning, and religious needs. Hospital chaplains and spiritual care teams can provide this support without claiming to cure a medical condition. They commonly work with people of any faith and with people who are not religious.

If spiritual healing helps you feel calmer or supported, it may be used alongside appropriate medical care. "Alongside" is important. A serious condition can worsen if testing, medicines, surgery, mental health care, or other effective treatment is delayed.

Your healthcare team should know about practices that affect treatment decisions. You can ask for your beliefs to be respected without agreeing to unwanted prayer, touch, rituals, or discussion. Consent applies to spiritual practices just as it does to other parts of care.

What can go wrong

The main risks are often indirect rather than caused by prayer or quiet reflection itself.

A health condition may go untreated if a healer promises a cure or advises against medical assessment. This can affect conditions such as infection, diabetes, cancer, heart disease, epilepsy, or severe mental illness. Feeling temporarily better does not confirm that the underlying condition has improved.

Some practices include more than spiritual activity. Herbs, supplements, restrictive diets, fasting, smoke, oils, or physical manipulation can have their own risks. Supplements may interact with medicines, and fasting may be unsafe in some medical situations. These parts should be assessed separately rather than assumed to be safe because they are described as spiritual.

Financial exploitation can occur when someone demands large or repeated payments, guarantees a cure, blames you when healing does not happen, or pressures you to cut off family or medical support. Coercive touch, secrecy, threats, and unwanted sexual contact are never acceptable.

Spiritual experiences can sometimes be difficult to distinguish from symptoms related to psychosis, mania, substance use, seizures, or delirium. A spiritual belief alone does not mean that someone has a mental health condition. Clinical assessment is appropriate when an experience causes severe distress, disrupts sleep or daily life, creates confusion, or involves commands to harm yourself or someone else.

Routine follow-up is appropriate if you have questions about combining spiritual healing with treatment, notice a gradual change in your health, or are considering herbs, fasting, or stopping a medicine.

Seek urgent medical help for rapidly worsening symptoms or serious changes in thinking or behaviour. Call emergency services for severe trouble breathing, signs of a stroke, heavy bleeding, loss of consciousness, or an immediate risk of self-harm or harm to others. Do not wait for a spiritual healing session in these situations.

What you can do

Decide what you want from the practice. Comfort, prayer, cultural support, relaxation, and treatment of a medical condition are different goals. A practitioner who offers spiritual support should be clear about what they can and cannot provide.

Before paying for a service, ask:

Tell your clinician about any supplements, diets, fasting, or changes to prescribed treatment. Keep an up-to-date list of medicines and complementary practices. If you are monitoring a diagnosed condition, use the usual medical tests or measurements recommended for that condition. Spiritual healing itself has no medical test that can show whether it is "working."

Do not stop a prescribed medicine suddenly based only on advice from a spiritual healer. Ask the prescribing clinician how a medicine can be changed safely if you have concerns.

If you want support rather than healing claims, ask whether your hospital, hospice, cancer centre, or community health service has a chaplain or spiritual care team. You may request support that fits your beliefs, or ask not to receive spiritual care.

If your practice is private prayer or reflection and it does not replace care or involve a risky activity, there may be nothing else you need to do.

- What will happen during the session?
- Will there be touch, fasting, supplements, or other physical practices?
- What evidence supports any health claims?
- What training, oversight, or complaints process exists?
- What will it cost, and how many sessions are proposed?
- Will the practitioner support continuing medical care?

Common questions

Is spiritual healing the same as faith healing?

Faith healing usually refers to healing sought through religious faith or divine action. Spiritual healing is a broader term and may include non-religious energy practices, rituals, or touch.

Is Reiki a type of spiritual healing?

It is often grouped with spiritual or energy healing. Reiki practitioners commonly place their hands lightly on or just above the body. Research has not established Reiki as an effective treatment for a health condition, and the proposed energy field has not been scientifically

demonstrated.

Can spiritual healing cure an illness?

There is no reliable evidence that it cures disease. It should not replace diagnosis, monitoring, medicines, surgery, psychotherapy, or emergency care. A person may find it emotionally or spiritually helpful without their medical condition changing.

Is spiritual healing harmless?

Prayer, reflection, and consensual non-invasive practices generally have low direct physical risk. Harm can still result from delayed care, false claims, financial pressure, unwanted touch, fasting, or unreported supplements.

What if my beliefs conflict with a proposed treatment?

Tell your healthcare team what matters to you and what concerns you. Ask about the purpose, benefits, risks, and alternatives to the treatment. A chaplain, cultural liaison service, interpreter, or patient advocate may help you discuss choices without taking over the medical decision.

Do I have to accept prayer or spiritual care?

No. Spiritual practices require your agreement. You may decline prayer, touch, rituals, or visits from spiritual care providers, even if someone else believes they would help.

Sources

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