

The Art of Softening Illness Suffering

Suffering is a universal concept that all humans face regardless of their individual differences, and they experience it for various reasons and at differing intensity levels - it is often defined as any emotional, social, spiritual, or physical discomfort that leaves someone feeling unwell.

Human suffering is often an avoided topic by healthcare providers delivering a palliative approach to care to individuals/families, even though it is a natural component of living with life limiting/threatening illness(es). We often try to focus on the positive aspects of their situation, use an overly upbeat persona around them and try to eliminate human suffering with pharmacological interventions. We must remember, when supporting people that are suffering, it is often our non-pharmacological, human caring interventions that have a profound impact on reducing their suffering from living with illness(es)¹⁻². Dr. Wright reminds us as healthcare providers to get back to the art of softening illness suffering in those we care for by using the word suffering in our practice, our notes and openly asking individuals/families about their suffering and acknowledging it through our verbal and nonverbal communication. From her extensive years of clinical practice and research, Dr. Wright offers the following seven Clinical Practice Skills to help soften the suffering of those for whom we care¹⁻²:

<p>Enter Suffering World 1</p> <p>Lean into those tender conversations with individuals/families about their suffering, and openly discuss it as we journey alongside them.</p>	<p>Offer Commendations 2</p> <p>Recognize and praise individuals/families for their courage, resiliency, and strength to live with and manage their life-limiting/threatening illness(es) and the ongoing suffering and losses it brings.</p>	<p>Generous Listening 3</p> <p>Not only actively listen to the individual/families but listen from a place of genuine, nonjudgmental loving kindness that allows you to listen with your whole heart and hear things you otherwise might miss.</p>
<p>Creating Silence & Presence 4</p> <p>Before meeting with individuals /families take a moment to ground yourself with techniques that work best for you i.e., deep breathing etc. to be fully present in the moment with them and embrace therapeutic silence as its often during that time we can draw on our intuitive knowledge to share in that moment.</p>	<p>Acknowledge & Witness Suffering 5</p> <p>This allows individuals/families to feel like their suffering, struggles, relationship changes and various losses from their illness(es) has been seen by those caring for them and that its real and as important as their physical issues such as pain. Often our small acts of kindness make the biggest impact in helping reduce their suffering, e.g., allowing a pet to visit.</p>	<p>Explore Meaning of Suffering 6</p> <p>Allow time and space for individuals/families to ask questions about their suffering and to discuss the meaning they associate with their suffering experiences and allow this to be an evolving conversation as the meaning we attach to experiences can shift over time.</p>
<p>Offering Hope After we acknowledge and sit alongside individuals/their families suffering, it then leads us to a place where we can help support them by reframing hope for their current situation and what is to come. It is not easy to sit alongside a person suffering, but it is important that we remain fully present with them and resist the urge to shift away from their suffering in times when they would like us to be there.</p>		<p>7 To learn more on this valuable topic, visit Dr. Lorraine M. Wright. See recent books: <i>Suffering and Spirituality and Illness Beliefs</i></p>

Resources:

1. Wright, L.M. *Suffering & Spirituality: The Path to Illness Healing*. (2017) 4th Floor Press: Calgary, AB.
2. Wright, L.M. (2023). *Softening Illness Suffering with Individuals/Families in Palliative Care: What are the Clinical Practices that Matter?* Invited Webinar for Canadian Palliative Care Nursing Association.
3. **Image:** Photo by [Chandler Cruttenden](#) on [Unsplash](#)

