Religion, Spirituality and Your Mental Health Care

Religion and spirituality can be important in the lives of youth and families. Religion and spirituality can:

- serve as sources of strength and coping during times of stress and illness
- serve as the basis for family values and traditions
- contribute to moral and social development

Many religious institutions also offer valuable community services and support for children and families, such as child care, shelters, food, recreation programs, and emergency aid.

Religion and spirituality can have positive influences on children and families, but some situations can also lead to distress. Normal adolescent development can lead to questioning religious beliefs or taking on other religious beliefs that may cause family conflict. Sometimes your family’s religious beliefs may differ from those your child is exposed to in everyday life (school, sports, and community activities). Being aware of how stressful this can be is important. Talking openly with your child can be helpful.

Child and adolescent psychiatrists appreciate the importance of religion and spirituality. A comprehensive mental health evaluation often includes questions about your child and family’s religious and spiritual beliefs. If religion and spirituality are an important part of your family’s life the following tips may be helpful:

- Your clinician should respect and be curious about the role of religion in the life of your child and your family.
- Your clinician does not have to be of the same religious and spiritual background as your family to provide good healthcare care to your child.
- With your permission, in some situations, it can be helpful for your clinician to speak to your religious or spiritual leader.

If you feel like your clinician is not aware of or receptive to the importance of religion and spirituality in your family discuss it with them. If the concerns continue, consider finding another clinician.

Differences in religion can cause conflict within a family. Sometimes children and adolescents find it helpful to talk to friends or other family members who observe their religion to help clarify and discuss beliefs and practices. If you and your child are having conflicts about religion, it may also be helpful to consult with your clergyperson. If the
conflicts do not improve and get in the way of your family getting along, consider consulting a trained mental health professional. If your child has a sudden or extreme change in his or her religious practices, this may be a sign of an underlying mental health problem. In these cases, it may be helpful to consult with a child and adolescent psychiatrist or another trained mental health professional.

For more information, see Facts for Families:

- #22 Normality
- #24 When to Seek Help for Your Child
- #25 Where to Find Help for Your Child
- #36 Helping Children After a Disaster
- #52 Comprehensive Psychiatric Evaluation

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