

The Missing Competency: Integrating Spiritual Care into Nursing and Lifestyle Medicine Practice

Mary Gannon Kaufmann

MS, RDN, MA, BCC from Healthy Rise Nutrition LLC

Abstract

Spirituality is increasingly recognized as a core social determinant of health, yet the healthcare field—particularly nursing and lifestyle medicine—continues to struggle with integrating spiritual care into practice. While nurses are trained to deliver holistic, patient-centered care, many lack confidence and competence in addressing patients' spiritual needs. This training gap poses a barrier to achieving optimal health outcomes, particularly as spiritual distress and unresolved grief are known to increase inflammation, impair glucose regulation, and heighten risk for chronic conditions like cardiovascular and neurodegenerative disease.

This session addresses the critical opportunity to embed spiritual care competencies into nursing education and lifestyle medicine training. Building upon evidence from the EPICC Project (Enhancing Nurses' and Midwives' Competence in Providing Spiritual key areas of spiritual care competency: intrapersonal spirituality, interpersonal spirituality, assessment and planning, and intervention and evaluation.

Participants will engage in a multi-modal learning experience that combines didactic content with reflective practice, peer exchange, and clinical application. Using structured tools such as spiritual timelines, clinical verbatims, and small group feedback, learners will explore their own values, emotional responses, and barriers to presence-based care. By fostering practitioner self-awareness and emotional availability, this training not only enhances patient care but also supports practitioner well-being and resilience against burnout.

Evidence underscores the power of spiritual care to reduce systemic inflammation, enhance neuroplasticity, and improve patient receptivity to health behavior change. Participants will leave equipped to recognize signs of spiritual distress, engage in meaningful spiritual dialogue, and offer appropriate interventions or referrals.

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Define and differentiate spirituality, religion, and spiritual distress.
- Identify spiritual needs and assess their impact on health behavior.
- Explain the physiological effects of spiritual care on chronic disease.
- Reflect on personal experiences to enhance presence and empathy.
- Practice and evaluate a spiritual care dialogue using verbatim tools.

This evidence-based, experiential session empowers practitioners to meet the often-overlooked spiritual needs that profoundly impact healing and well-being.

