

Assessing and Addressing Spiritual Needs

ELSA – A New Model

Paul Graham, Head of Spiritual Care & Wellbeing
Lorraine Allan, Senior Chaplain



Introduction

Our primary aim was to develop a spiritual needs assessment model that could be used by everyone in health and social care.

We needed a model that could be used in everyday practice and would also have an enhanced version for chaplains who are spiritual care specialists.

We needed a model which was:

- Portable
- Scalable
- Supports good practice

Background

Reflecting on current practice, it was obvious that there was no established assessment model being used across Scotland. In order to provide good quality person-centred care, which considered the whole person, it was apparent that a new assessment model was needed.

The spiritual assessment models which existed¹ were viewed as being outdated and not easily adapted to our cultural context. Data from the 2022 census in Scotland² showed that the majority of people (51%) did not identify as being affiliated with a religious / faith community. This was a significant shift from 27% in 2001 and 37% in 2011 a number of the existing models were predicated on a presumption of religious belief and membership of a faith community.

In daily practice, chaplains often report that a significant part of their role is to help people and families articulate their (spiritual) distress and/or loss, and also to co-create meaningful rituals that help them process and make sense of their experience.

Our starting point therefore appeared to be out of alignment with the real lived experience of the majority of service users and staff. The existing models seem to focus on the outside and move inwards, rather than seek to begin at the core of the person, what matters to them at that moment, and move outwards.

The changing demographics, the loss of a spiritual vocabulary, the changing paradigm of health and social care, and the professionalisation of spiritual care, are all factors that have contributed to the development of the ELSA model.

What is Spiritual Assessment?

The term "assessment" derives from the Latin words "ad" (meaning "right up next to") and "sedere" (meaning "to sit"). It suggests the idea of sitting with a person for a while before drawing any substantial conclusions. This 'sitting with' is an essential aspect of relationship building and spiritual assessment.

"Assess" is also preferred over "diagnose", as it implies a less prescriptive or judgemental attitude as it seeks to better understand a person's compromised human spirit and its needs. Conducting a spiritual assessment helps the healthcare team understand and respond to the individual's current emotional and spiritual needs.

Appraising the human spirit is inherently challenging and can only provide a partial, temporary, and tentative understanding. Despite its limitations, a spiritual assessment can be valuable in helping maintain a patients' humanity and provide guidance for personal and interpersonal care.



ELSA – A New Model

Based on the book "Spiritual Care in Common Terms" (Hilsman, 2017)³ we identified four key domains for assessing spiritual needs. The four domains of need are:

Emotional Support (E), Loss and Grief (L), Sustains the Spirit (S), Additional Support (A).

Aligned to each domain there is an internal question to help guide the listener.

- E:** What **emotions** are needing attended to right now?
- L:** What **loss** is causing this person distress?
- S:** How does this person uniquely **sustain** their own **spirit**?
- A:** What **additional support** may be needed for this person?

In order to help facilitate a truly person-centred discussion, it is helpful to consider a starting question something like... "What is important for you to talk about just now?"

Emotional Support	Loss & Grief	Sustains the Spirit	Additional Support
What emotions are needing attended to right now? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shock• Fear, anxiety• Resentment, hostility• Sadness, despair• Denial	What loss is causing this person distress? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Current, recent, prior loss• Dying, anticipatory grief• Loss of role / identity• Loss of relationship(s)• Loss of control	How does this person uniquely sustain their own spirit? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What matters to them• Significant relationships• Hopes and loves• Hobbies and interests• Faith / belief practices	What additional support may be needed for this person? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Spiritual Care• Addictions / mental health• Family issues / conflict• Finance / benefits advice• Advocacy

The image above (which we have produced as aide memoire cards for staff) shows each domain, the guiding question and some 'identifiers' of need.

This 'Everyday' model of ELSA is primarily designed to be used by 'non-specialists' in spiritual care.

It offers a compass for guiding the listener as a person shares stories in trying to make sense of their situation. This is not a strict nor rigid checklist but rather a means of identifying sources of distress or discomfort.

Conclusion

This model of assessing spiritual need has and will continue to be a developing landscape. We are currently rolling this model out across our acute sites and aim to share this in community settings.

As highlighted within the new national framework (Scot Gov, 2023)⁴ "all staff have a role to play in ensuring that the spiritual needs of individuals are recognised and met".

"Spiritual care can empower and benefit both carer and cared for; nurturing the individual to celebrate and flourish during times of joy and growth, supporting people to find strength and comfort during times of transition, uncertainty, and illness" (Scot Gov, 2023)⁴

The ethos of spiritual care affirms that people are not merely physical bodies requiring mechanical fixing. Spirituality can help people maintain health and cope with illness, trauma, loss, and life transitions by integrating body, mind and spirit" (Scot Gov, 2023)⁴

The ELSA model is a tool, a compass, for assisting in the assessment of spiritual need and leading to the better care of individuals.



References

1. Fitchett, G. (2012) 'Next steps for spiritual assessment in healthcare', in M. Cobb, C.M. Puchalski, and B. Rumbold (eds) *Oxford Textbook of Spirituality in Healthcare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 299–305.
2. Official Statistics publication for Scotland (2024) Scotland's Census. Available from: <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/census-results/at-a-glance/religion/> [Accessed 30 October 2024]
3. Hilsman, G.J. (2017) *Spiritual care in common terms*. London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
4. Scottish Government (2023) *Discovering meaning, purpose and hope through person centred wellbeing and spiritual care: framework*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Contact Details

Paul Graham
paul.graham@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk

Lorraine Allan
lorraine.allan3@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk
spiritualcare@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk