

Journal Watch

## **Demoralization Syndrome - a Relevant Psychiatric Diagnosis for Palliative Care**

D Kissane, D Clarke, A Street. Journal of Palliative Care 17:1/2001; 12-21

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### **Abstract:**

Hopelessness, loss of meaning and existential distress are proposed as the core features of the diagnostic category of demoralization syndrome. This syndrome can be differentiated from depression and is recognizable in palliative care settings. It is associated with chronic medical illness, disability, bodily disfigurement, fear of loss of dignity, social isolation, and - where there is a subjective sense of incompetence - feelings of greater dependency on others or the perception of being a burden. Because of the sense of impotence or helplessness, those with the syndrome predictably progress to a desire to die or to commit suicide. A treatment approach is described which has the potential to alleviate the distress caused by this syndrome. Overall, demoralization syndrome has satisfactory face, descriptive, predictive, construct, and divergent validity, suggesting its utility as a diagnostic category in palliative care.

### **Comments:**

**Strengths/uniqueness:** This suggested syndrome does address a grey area between normal grief reaction and depression. Recognizing and naming this condition of hopelessness, helplessness and existential distress might help to focus on possible interventions.

**Weaknesses:** The authors do not state whether the treatments mentioned are effective in treating the proposed syndrome. It is not clear how the proposed treatment options differ from well-established basic Palliative Care principles. There are concerns that such a label might conversely lead to further under-recognition of depression.

**Relevance to Palliative Care:** At this stage it is a suggestion only and it will be interesting to see where further research will lead the authors.