

Eighteen Commandments for the Jewish Community As They Seek to Be More Responsive to People Living with Chronic Illness

Developed by Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, LCSW, for the JBFCS New York Jewish Healing Center, with incredible input from participants at the “*Bikur Cholim Over the Long Haul*” workshop at the 19th Annual JBFCS Rabbi Isaac N. Trainin Bikur Cholim Conference, November 12, 2006.

1. Listen. Try to hear what I’m saying, and play it back to check that you’ve heard correctly. Your being an ear is probably more helpful than your being a mouth. Your silent presence can be a gift.
2. Ask me about what I need; don’t make assumptions.
3. Do not sugarcoat, or as one person said, “don’t pour whipped cream on worms.” This really is what it is. I have a “new normal,” and I’d appreciate your being honest and realistic about it.
4. Do not label. I am more than my disease or diagnosis, even if its influence is extensive. I am *me*, a person with a name and a history and a life, and a complicated personality like everybody else.
5. Be a supportive presence. This sometimes involves doing absolutely nothing but joining me where I am. Other times I may need some specific assistance. Caring community is all-important, and you are part of that for me.
6. Empower me to do for myself and for others, as possible. Even when I may seem incapacitated, I may need/want to be as active, independent, and giving as I can. Don’t let the “tyranny of sympathy” treat me as helpless and reinforce excessive dependence.
7. Bring humor to our encounters; it’s an important way that Jews/people survive.
8. Validate what you hear me saying; show you’ve heard and understand as best as you can.
9. Allow me to grieve my losses. There may be a long and growing list of these, and only I know what still requires grieving. Don’t stop my tears; my soul is speaking.
10. Allow me my anger, allow it to be expressed....along with fear, disgust, awkwardness, and other ‘difficult’ emotions/feelings. This is part of the path to peace.
11. Expand your radar to take in the fullness of my life, the range of my resources and my challenges, of my wholeness.

12. Before visiting me, consider what your expectations and concerns are. After visiting me, get to know your own reactions and ‘aftertastes.’ Do this for your own health and so that unpleasant residues won’t prevent you from future visiting!

13. For some of us, God’s Presence/the *Shekhinah*, is very much in the room and efforts should be made to be aware of that and not to obscure it (for example, by looming too large over the one who is suffering.) Others may not share this spiritual-religious reference point, but still value the teachings of care, love, dignity, etc. that underlie it, from their own place, in their own way.

14. Be aware, and willing to discuss, words, stories, or ideas in the prayer book or the Torah that are alienating. Help me in my struggle with these.

15. Help me find teachings – wise sayings, images, parables, etc. – that are instructive, comforting, inspiring, etc.

16. Maintain your curiosity about what my illness means to me – explore that with me on the days that I can do so. But don’t tell me what it means to me, or try to change my mind.

17. Help my family with what they/we need – shopping, transportation, childcare, referrals, whatever.

18. Don’t hesitate to cry; your tears can be a gift.

