



# The Future of Spiritual Care in Australia

A national study on spirituality, wellbeing  
and spiritual care in hospitals.

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Spiritual  
Health  
Association

mccrindle



# Contents

Introduction from Mark McCrindle	04
Methodology	05
Spirituality and Spiritual Care in Australia – A Summary	06
Australia is a culturally and spiritually diverse nation	07
Defining the relationship between wellbeing and spirituality	10
Spiritual care supports the things that give meaning to a person's life	14
Australians have a desire for spiritual care in the future	16

# Introduction from Mark McCrindle

I am pleased to introduce new research on the experience, benefits, and future of spiritual care in Australia's hospitals and spirituality in Australia more broadly. With 61% of Australians affiliated with religion<sup>1</sup> and 14% considering themselves spiritual but not religious<sup>2</sup>, spiritual care has a vital position within Australia. Spiritual care provides Australians with peace, support, and confidence in their treatment process and 34% of Australians who have stayed in hospital for at least one week, have received spiritual or pastoral care. Yet in the future, more than one in two (54%) Australians would like to receive spiritual care when in hospital. This desire for spiritual care is driven by younger generations, with three in five Gen Z (64%) and Gen Y (62%) Australians likely to desire spiritual care in hospitals in the future (cf. 53% Gen X, 41% Baby Boomers, 52% Builders).

Not only do Australians believe spirituality is connected to mental (55%), relational (43%) and physical wellbeing (41%), but research shows there is a psychosomatic and pneumasomatic link between spirituality and health and wellbeing. Considering people search for and turn to spirituality during times of crisis<sup>2</sup> it is clear spiritual care is paramount to healthcare, providing an opportunity to humanise medicine<sup>3</sup>. This makes a patient's search for meaning and relationships the focal point of medical care<sup>4</sup>. It is only when we stop and consider Australia's diverse spiritual climate and Australians' desire for spirituality during times of crisis, that the importance of spiritual care is realised.

This report seeks to measure key trends within Australia's spiritual landscape, providing insight into Australians' spiritual identity. This includes how they define spirituality, how they talk about spirituality, how they engage with spiritual care and what their expectations are for spiritual care in the future, specifically in hospital settings.

This research has been commissioned by Spiritual Health Association and conducted independently by McCrindle. The Spiritual Health Association was formed in 1974 and is the peak body for spiritual care in the Australian health sector and focuses on advocacy for and promotion of compassionate, person-centered spiritual care in health services. *A study of Spirituality in the United States* produced by the Fetzer Institute in 2020 was an inspiration for this report.

**Mark McCrindle**  
*Principal, McCrindle Research*



# Methodology

To understand the role of spirituality in Australia and the future of spiritual care in hospitals, four focus groups and a nationally representative survey of Australians were conducted by McCrindle to gather data for this new report. Themes to explore in the focus groups and survey were developed by reviewing current research about spirituality in Australia, focusing on the role of spirituality in healthcare. The insights for this report were produced by analysing the key themes from the quantitative and qualitative research. Further analysis was done to cross tabulate the data to understand how the survey questions break down by key demographic and psychographic variables.

## Focus groups

The report features qualitative insights based on four focus groups with Gen Z (18-26), Gen Y (27-41), Gen X (42-56) and Baby Boomers (57-75) between the 19th and 24th of August 2021. Insights from Builders (76+) mentioned in this report are drawn from the nationally representative survey.

Recruitment:

Z

**Gen Z:** 1 group mixed spiritual, religious, and non-spiritual/religious beliefs, 4 males and 5 females

Y

**Gen Y:** 1 group mixed spiritual, religious, and non-spiritual/religious beliefs, 4 males and 5 females

X

**Gen X:** 1 group mixed spiritual, religious, and non-spiritual/religious beliefs, 5 males and 5 females

BB

**Baby Boomers:** 1 group mixed spiritual, religious, and non-spiritual/religious beliefs, 5 males and 5 females

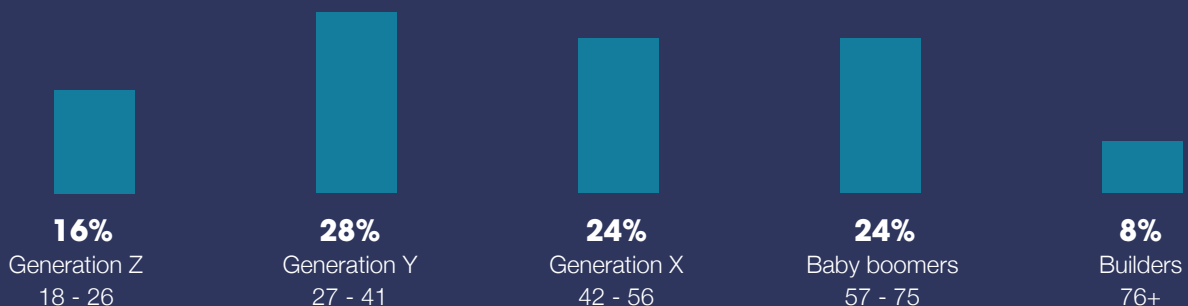
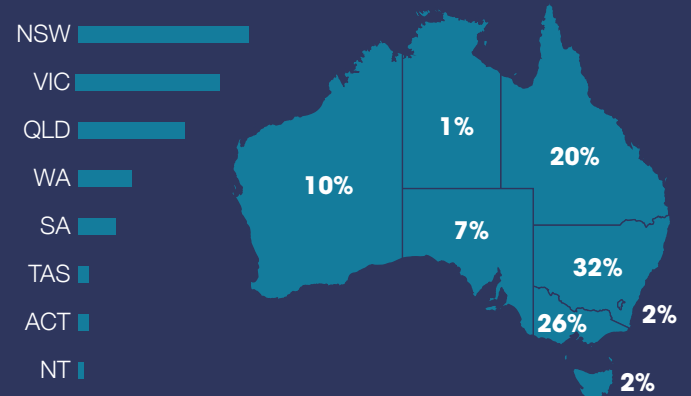
## National survey of Australians

Quantitative insights in this report are based on data gathered through a nationally representative survey by age, gender and geography which built on insights gathered from the focus groups conducted. The survey was in field from 16th – 28th September 2021, yielding a total of 2,501 complete responses. Results from this survey on Australians have a margin of error of 1.96% and a confidence interval of 95%.



## Recruitment

Respondents were identified through Cint, an international panel exchange.



# Spirituality and Spiritual Care in Australia – A Summary

## SPIRITUAL CARE IN AUSTRALIA

### Australians are interested in spiritual care<sup>1</sup>



Of the Australians who have previously stayed in hospital for at least one week, one in three (34%) have previously received spiritual or pastoral care.



65% of Australians who have previously stayed in hospital for more than one week and have received spiritual or pastoral care had an extremely/very positive experience.



**One in two Australians (54%) would be interested in receiving spiritual or pastoral care in the future**

### Australians who have previously stayed in hospital for at least one week and have received spiritual or pastoral care felt supported in the following ways:

(strongly/somewhat supported)

**85%**

Feeling confident in their treatment process

**84%**

Being supported by others who listened to their fears and hopes

**82%**

Comforted by my religious or spiritual beliefs

### The biggest barriers to spiritual care are:

**25%**

Not feeling comfortable sharing personal details with someone I don't know

**18%**

No access to private space

**14%**

Not feeling comfortable talking to someone who doesn't share my faith or spiritual beliefs

## DEFINING SPIRITUALITY IN AUSTRALIA

### Spirituality is essential to wellbeing

Australians believe spirituality is connected to:



**55%**

Mental wellbeing



**43%**

Relational wellbeing



**41%**

Physical wellbeing

### Australians are affiliated with a range of religious, non-religious and spiritual beliefs<sup>1</sup>

Christianity **52%**

Islam **3%**

Buddhism **2%**

Hinduism **2%**

Sikhism **1%**

Judaism **0.4%**

Other **0.4%**

No religion **30%**

### Spirituality offers Australians:



**50%**  
Peace



**49%**  
Values



**34%**  
Purpose



**34%**  
Morality



**34%**  
Love

<sup>1</sup> Spiritual care supports what gives meaning and purpose to your life including the beliefs, traditions, values and practices that are important to you.

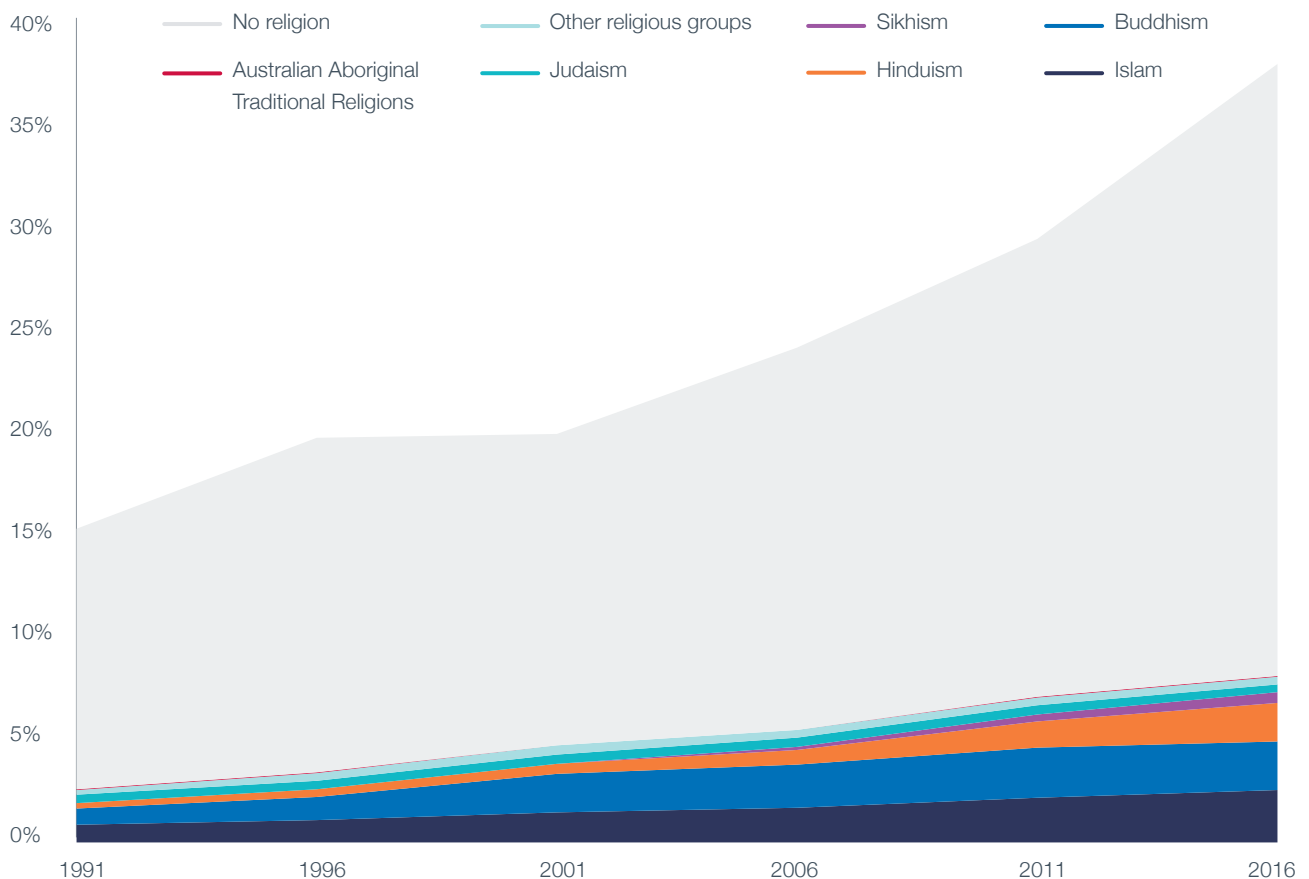
# Australia is a culturally and spiritually diverse nation

ABS data reveals Australia's religious and spiritual landscape is changing<sup>5</sup> with less Australians identifying with Christianity as a religion, and instead, identifying increasingly with either no religion or other spiritual beliefs<sup>1</sup>. While the proportion of Australians affiliating with Christianity has decreased over the last 20 years (88% 1966 cf. 52% 2016), according to the ABS census those who affiliate with other main religions, such as Buddhism and Islam<sup>1</sup>, no religion, and other spiritual beliefs, is increasing<sup>2</sup>.

Young Australians are driving this change with those aged between 18-34 more likely to be affiliated with no religion or religions other than Christianity<sup>1</sup>.

Overall, the proportion of Australians who are affiliated with the term spiritual but not religious (14%) is also growing<sup>2</sup>.

## AUSTRALIANS' AFFILIATION WITH OTHER MAIN RELIGIONS, SPIRITUAL BELIEFS AND NO RELIGION IS INCREASING.





## Spirituality has an evolving meaning, with Australians believing spirituality and religion are connected, but not the same

The data gathered for this report reveals that the religious and spiritual beliefs of Australians is rapidly diversifying and as a result, the definition of what it means to be religious or spiritual is changing. Two in five Australians (42%) believe in a God or higher power and a similar proportion (39%) also believe there is a spiritual realm.

Three in ten (31%), however, prefer a scientific and rational, evidence-based approach to life and small proportion (13%) believe spirituality and religion are outdated.

Interestingly, younger Australians believe spirituality and religion can be separate, being more likely to associate spirituality with an individual experience and religion with an organised community.

Z

*"With spirituality, it can be separate from religion because it's not necessarily hand in hand, but a lot of people may believe to be spiritual you have to be religious. I think it can be quite separate. I know people who are spiritual [and] not religious."*

~ Gen Z

Y

*"Religion comes with an institutionalised community. Religion is more of the community and the religion you follow."*

~ Gen Y

Y

*"I associate religion with organised religion, where spirituality is individualised. I think spirituality can be in organised religion, but spirituality is [more] personal rather than set."*

~ Gen Y

Older generations of Australians, on the other hand, describe spirituality as transcending beyond religion, being the experience of a greater sense of purpose.

X

*"Spirituality to me is linked to your internal beliefs and not necessarily linked to a god, but a higher power."*

~ Gen X

X

*"I don't need a broker between me and the greater beyond and spirituality is common across humanity. Historically, way back in the ancient civilisation, in North America, Aboriginal culture embraced spirituality deeply. Organised religions also have a spiritual aspect to it, but I think it transcends that."*

~ Gen X

BB

*"In my field where I'm teaching around that area, spirituality comes to me as more about a sense of purpose, a bigger sense, my values, character - which tend to point us to something bigger."*

~ Baby Boomer







### Australians consider a range of experiences to be spiritual

Spirituality is a complex phenomenon, experienced by people of all religious or spiritual affiliations and, as such, can be unique to the individual<sup>6</sup>. People who identify with spirituality more strongly are not only more engaged in civic life but are also likely to feel more connected to humanity and the world as a whole<sup>6</sup>.

One in two Australians (53%) feel extremely or very connected to the natural environment, while two in five (40%) feel extremely or very connected with humanity as a whole. A similar proportion (37%) feel connected (extremely/very) to the universe and one in three (34%) feel connected (extremely/very) to a higher power.

Australians also consider a range of experiences to be spiritual with some describing waves of peace washing over them.

Y

*"To me, spirituality is caring for the environment, nature, others. I tell my kids if you can be anything in life, be kind."*

~ Gen Y

Z

*"I definitely found [spirituality] was a place I could take a belief and have respite from the turmoil in my life. It made me feel connected to the earth and those around me. You looked for greater meaning rather than focusing on the troubles of everyday life."* ~ Gen Z

Y

*"I was saying "please help me sleep" and praying to sleep and I remember this calm washing over me and going to sleep and I felt very connected to something."*

~ Gen Y

# Defining the relationship between wellbeing and spirituality

Wellbeing can be described as a heightened state that's beyond just feeling happy or having good health. It's a state of flourishing where people thrive in many aspects of their life<sup>7</sup>. Not only does wellbeing encompass physical and mental health, but many cultures, including Aboriginal, Torres Strait<sup>8</sup> and Maori<sup>9</sup>, define wellbeing in terms of

relational and spiritual wellbeing. Wellbeing, therefore, can be taken to mean a state of flourishing in the physical, mental, relational and spiritual aspects of a person's life.

Australians look after different aspects of their wellbeing in multiple ways.



## Physical wellbeing



## Mental wellbeing



## Relational wellbeing



## Spiritual wellbeing



## Spirituality plays an integral role in wellbeing

Australians believe spirituality is connected to their overall wellbeing. Not only does one in two believe spirituality is extremely or very connected to their mental wellbeing (55%) but two in five believe spirituality is extremely or very connected to their relational (43%)<sup>2</sup> and physical (41%) wellbeing.

## TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU BELIEVE SPIRITUALITY IS CONNECTED TO THE DIFFERENT AREAS OF WELLBEING LISTED BELOW?

*Extremely/very connected*



**55%**

**Mental wellbeing**



**43%**

**Relational wellbeing**



**41%**

**Physical wellbeing**

<sup>2</sup> According to the University of California Davis relational wellbeing refers to building healthy, nurturing and supportive relationships as well as fostering genuine connection with those around you as relationships can provide support during difficult times.



## Spiritual wellbeing and practices

Australians care for their physical and relational health in a similar way, however, they care for their spirituality in unique ways. In addition to prayer (45%), religious services (39%) and nature (37%), two in five Australians spend time on their own (36%) or meditate (35%) to care for their spiritual wellbeing.



*"With my kids every morning before they go to school, we do affirmations, so it might be 'I'm brave' or whatever it is, but for me it's a grounding sentiment for the day."*

**~ Gen Y**



*"[I practice my spirituality through] pilgrimage. I've done world youth day which is a big event for young Catholics but even my own footsteps, going to Malta and following the footsteps of St Paul and seeing the tombs of past Saints, that's very spiritually awakening for me."*

**~ Gen Z**

**Spirituality offers peace, values, and connectedness**

As people grow in their spirituality, they are likely to experience more peace and a sense of purpose. They are also more likely to become more involved with their communities as they believe spirituality is connected to all aspects of wellbeing and humanity.

When thinking about what spirituality offers, Australians are most likely to believe spirituality offers them peace (50%), values (49%) and a sense of purpose (39%). This is especially true for younger Australians, with Gen Z (42%) and Gen Y (38%) Australians being more likely than their older counterparts to believe spirituality offers them purpose (cf. 29% Gen X, 29% Baby Boomers, 33% Builders).



*"Unity and spirituality go hand in hand. Part of spirituality is caring for others, respecting your community, putting positivity out there. I have reconnected with my spirituality after a bit of a break, and I see a lot of really individual ego driven stuff whereas I think spirituality is bigger than just you. Unity and looking out for people is a massive part of spirituality."*

- Gen Y



*"Human beings yearn for a spirituality that will root us in the love, courage, and hope that we need to build our lives and communities<sup>6</sup>."*

**SPIRITUALITY OFFERS AUSTRALIANS**



**50%**  
Peace



**49%**  
Values



**34%**  
Purpose



**34%**  
Morality



**34%**  
Love

**YOUNGER GENERATIONS PARTICULARLY FIND A SENSE OF PURPOSE IN SPIRITUALITY**



**42%**  
Gen Z



**38%**  
Gen Y



**29%**  
Gen X



**29%**  
Baby Boomers



**33%**  
Builders





# Spiritual care supports the things that give meaning to a person's life

Every person has a desire to be cared for, not only physically, mentally, and relationally but also spiritually. When asked to remember a time where they felt cared for, Australians describe periods of being physically or mentally ill, where family members, hospital staff or friends and community members sacrificed time and money to care for them. The value of human connection and the difference this makes is strong as Australians reflect on care they have received.

BB

*"[I felt cared for] when I went to hospital for surgery and the nurses and doctors ensured I was ok and that all my questions were answered, regardless of how silly they were."*

~ Baby Boomer

Y

*"I was extremely mentally unwell. I left my house (not permanently) and stayed at my parents', then mental health rehab. People were always checking in on me, the professionals were looking after me and people just came to lift me up."*

~ Gen Y

## IN ADDITION TO MEDICAL CARE, WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE PROVIDED IN HOSPITALS TO FACILITATE A HOLISTIC CARE EXPERIENCE?

*Please select all that apply. Top five.*





## Australians desire avenues for holistic care in hospitals

While most people may not experience extended periods of time where they need to be cared for, one in two Australians (49%) have previously stayed in hospital for at least one week. In addition to medical care, Australians would like hospitals to provide time with their family and friends (61%), music to listen to (55%) and opportunity to spend time outside (50%). Just over two in five Australians (46%) would like books to read and a similar proportion (40%) would like the opportunity to spend time on their own.

Other forms of additional care Australians would like provided in hospitals include a counsellor to talk to (31%), a spiritual or pastoral care worker to talk to (18%) and space for rituals, including meditation or guided imagery (10%).

## Australians have had positive experiences with spiritual care

Integral to holistic healthcare is spiritual care or care that supports the things that give meaning and purpose to a person's life, including the beliefs, traditions, values, and practices that are important to them. While spiritual care has always played a role in healthcare, understanding about the spiritual care workforce is shifting as the importance for spiritual care in Australia is recognised<sup>10</sup>. Not only have one in three Australians who have previously stayed in hospital for at least one week received spiritual or pastoral care (34%), but two in three of them (65%), have had an extremely or very positive experience.

When thinking about the spiritual or pastoral care they have received while in hospital, Australians remember being cared for by others who brought meals and were there to talk to.

Z

*"I know my cousin was given access to those resources of having grief counselors and she was saying "I have found myself so angry" and that taking up that grief counseling made her feel more grounded and [helped her to] understand what's going on."*

~ Gen Z

While everyone may not have received spiritual or pastoral care firsthand, some Australians have family members who have been spiritually or pastorally cared for in hospital.

BB

*"I can't speak to it personally but when my father was in hospice, the people that work there and all the other volunteers show incredible love and different areas of affection and even Roscoe the dog, I can't tell you, it was unbelievable. My dad was a non-religious person, and he was at the hospice but the people there, the love and the care, you can feel it. They were so good to dad it was lovely. You felt loved and nurtured."*

~ Baby Boomer

Australians who have previously received spiritual or pastoral care in hospitals believe it helped them to be confident about their treatment process (85%), to feel supported by others who would listen to their fears and hopes (84%) and helped them to feel comforted by their religious or spiritual beliefs (82%).

## AUSTRALIANS WHO HAVE PREVIOUSLY RECEIVED SPIRITUAL OR PASTORAL CARE IN HOSPITALS HAVE FELT STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT SUPPORTED IN:



85%

Feeling confident in their treatment process



84%

Being supported by others who listened to their fears and hopes



82%

Experiencing a strengthened sense of spirituality or religious beliefs

# Australians have a desire for spiritual care in the future

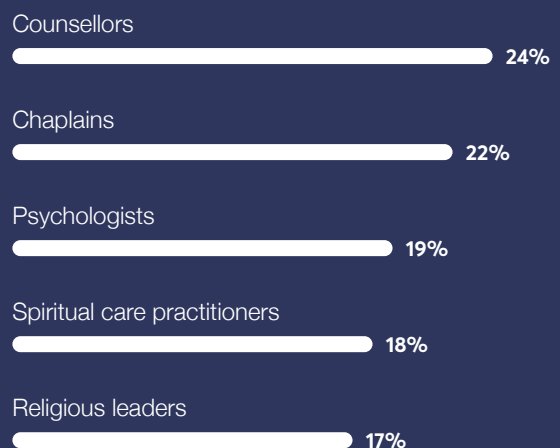
While one in three Australians who have previously stayed in hospital for at least one week have received spiritual or pastoral care before (34%), one in two Australians (54%) have a desire to receive spiritual or pastoral care in the future. Younger generations are driving this interest with Gen Z (64%) and Gen Y (62%) Australians being more likely to desire spiritual or pastoral care in hospitals than their older counterparts (cf. 53% Gen X, 41% Baby Boomers, 52% Builders).

This sentiment is also shared by Australians of all religious and spiritual backgrounds (72% other main religions, such as Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism, 69% Christian, 64% other, 58% I have spiritual beliefs but do not identify with any main religion, 28% I do not affiliate with any main religion or spiritual belief).

## Australians are likely to engage counsellors for spiritual care

When thinking about who Australians would like to engage for spiritual care in hospitals, Australians highlight professionals in the field of mental health, religion, or spiritual care.

### TOP PRACTITIONERS FROM WHOM AUSTRALIANS WOULD PREFER TO RECEIVE SPIRITUAL CARE:



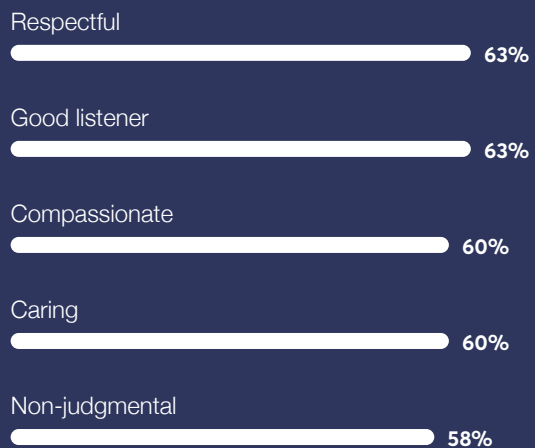
Interestingly, younger generations of Australians are more likely than their older counterparts to have a preference to receive spiritual care from those in mental health or medical fields.

Category	Gen Z (18-26)	Gen Y (27-41)	Gen X (42-56)	Baby Boomers (57-75)	Builders (76+)
Psychologists	29%	24%	19%	8%	7%
Counsellors	26%	28%	25%	18%	19%
Doctors	24%	18%	16%	8%	13%
Psychiatrists	22%	16%	12%	7%	6%
Religious leaders	19%	17%	15%	15%	22%
Nurses	19%	15%	16%	10%	16%
Social workers	19%	17%	13%	8%	13%
Health care workers	17%	15%	12%	6%	9%
Wellbeing coaches	16%	19%	19%	9%	9%
Spiritual care practitioner	15%	20%	19%	16%	19%

### Spiritual care practitioners should be qualified and respectful

Australians also believe spiritual care practitioners should hold qualifications (69%). The most likely postgraduate qualification spiritual care practitioners should hold is in medicine (49%), followed by psychiatry (46%) or psychology (43%), while the most likely undergraduate qualification is counselling (34%) or humanities (31%). One in five Australians believe they should hold an advanced diploma in spiritual care (27%).

Apart from specific qualifications, Australians are also looking for spiritual care practitioners to hold certain character qualities. The most important qualities for spiritual care practitioners to hold are:



**ALMOST SEVEN IN TEN AUSTRALIANS (69%) BELIEVE SPIRITUAL CARE PRACTITIONERS SHOULD HOLD A QUALIFICATION**



## Barriers to engaging with spiritual care

Despite Australians having a desire for spiritual care and believing spiritual care should be provided in both private (77%) and public hospitals (75%), some Australians experience barriers to engaging with spiritual care. For one in four Australians (25%) the biggest barrier is not feeling comfortable sharing personal details with someone they don't know. This is followed by no access to private space (18%) and not feeling comfortable talking to someone who doesn't share their faith or spiritual beliefs (14%).

### THE BIGGEST BARRIERS TO SPIRITUAL CARE ARE:



**25%**

Not feeling comfortable sharing personal details with someone I don't know



**18%**

No access to private space



**14%**

Not feeling comfortable talking to someone who doesn't share my faith or spiritual beliefs

To further improve spiritual care, Australians believe spiritual care practitioners should be there to listen and talk to people in hospitals and should be more relational. Some Australians are also interested in being given more opportunity to spend time alone or see their family and friends.



*"Just more one on one time. [To be] respected for whatever my beliefs or religion is, not judged."*

**~ Gen X**



*"I would like more alone time and a space to do my arts and crafts because that's what connects to me the most."*

**~ Gen Y**

Other Australians highlighted the need for spiritual care practitioners to have a greater understanding of all religions.



*"A greater understanding of the different needs, styles and formats of spiritual/religious beliefs/traditions. [An understanding] that not everyone is branded with one religious mode or doctrine."*

**~ Baby Boomer**



- 1 Religion in Australia, 2016 Census Data Summary, Australian Bureau of Statistics
- 2 Faith and belief in Australia, 2017, McCrindle
- 3 Spiritual care training provided to healthcare professionals: A systematic review, Journal of Pastoral Care and Counselling, 2015
- 4 Are the providers of spiritual care in your hospital capable? Narrative review of professional accountability in Australia, Kate Eve and Christian Phillips, 2020
- 5 Religiosity in Australia, Part 1: Personal faith according to the numbers, 2021, Rationalist Society of Australia
- 6 Study of Spirituality in the United States, 2020, Fetzer Institute
- 7 Wellbeing, Black Dog Institute
- 8 Indigenous health and wellbeing, 2020, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
- 9 Te Whare Tapa Whā, A wellbeing model developed by leading Māori health advocate Sir Mason Durie in 1984, describing health and wellbeing as wharenuī, Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand
- 10 Gardner et al., 2018, What Spirituality Means for Patients and Families in Health Care



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