

Designing for Spiritual Innovation: *Exploring Futures for Digital Chaplaincy through the SPIRIT Design Framework*

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TRANSFORMING CHAPLAINCY



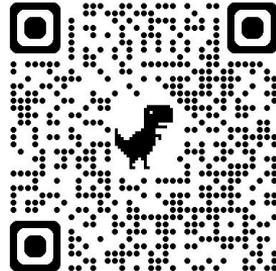
JOHN
TEMPLETON
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Inspiring Awe & Wonder

Manuscript Preprint + Today's Slides →

*C. Estelle Smith, Alemitu Bezabih, Shadi Nourriz, and
Jesan Ahammed Ovi. SPIRIT: A Design Framework To
Support Technology Interventions for Spiritual Care
Within and Beyond the Clinic. ACM CHI 2026.*

<https://estellesmithphd.com/publications/>

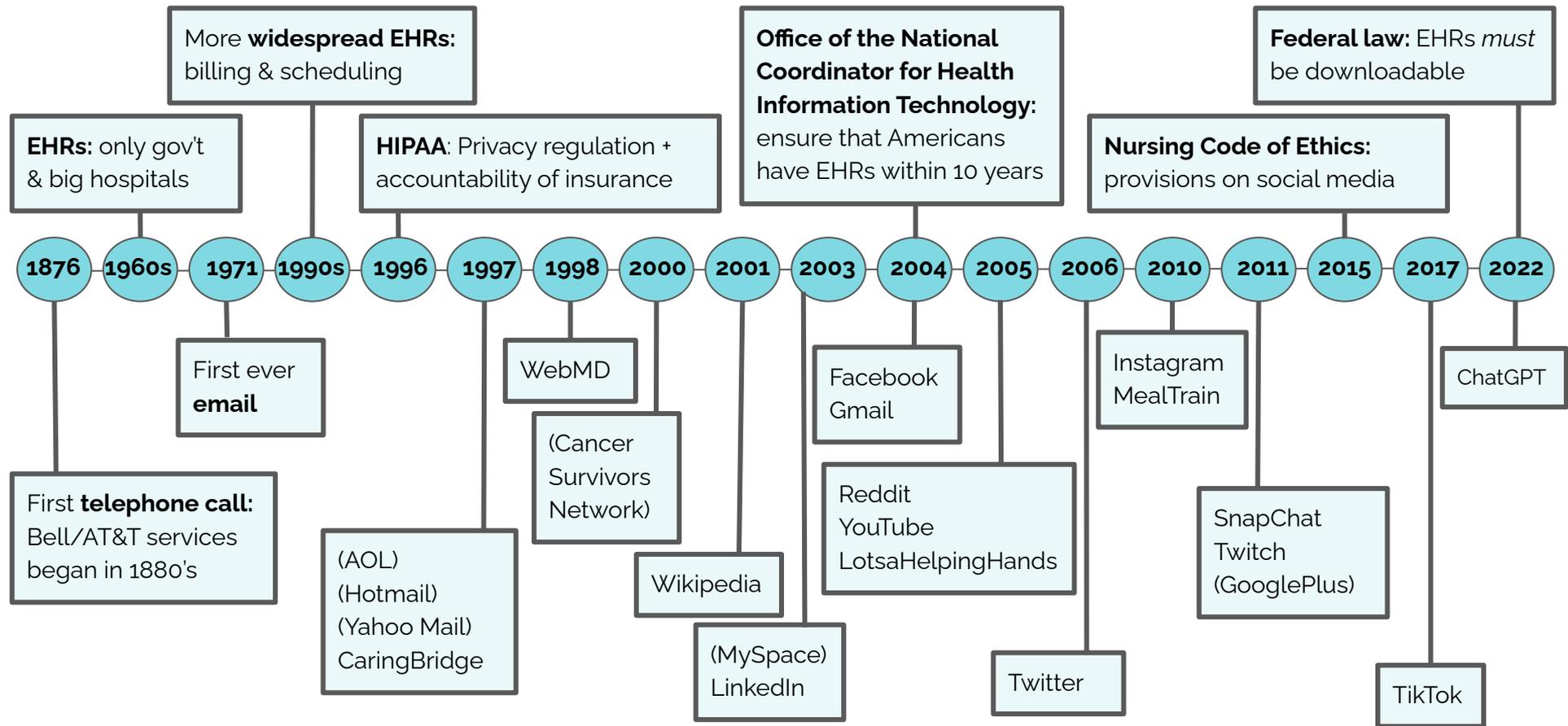


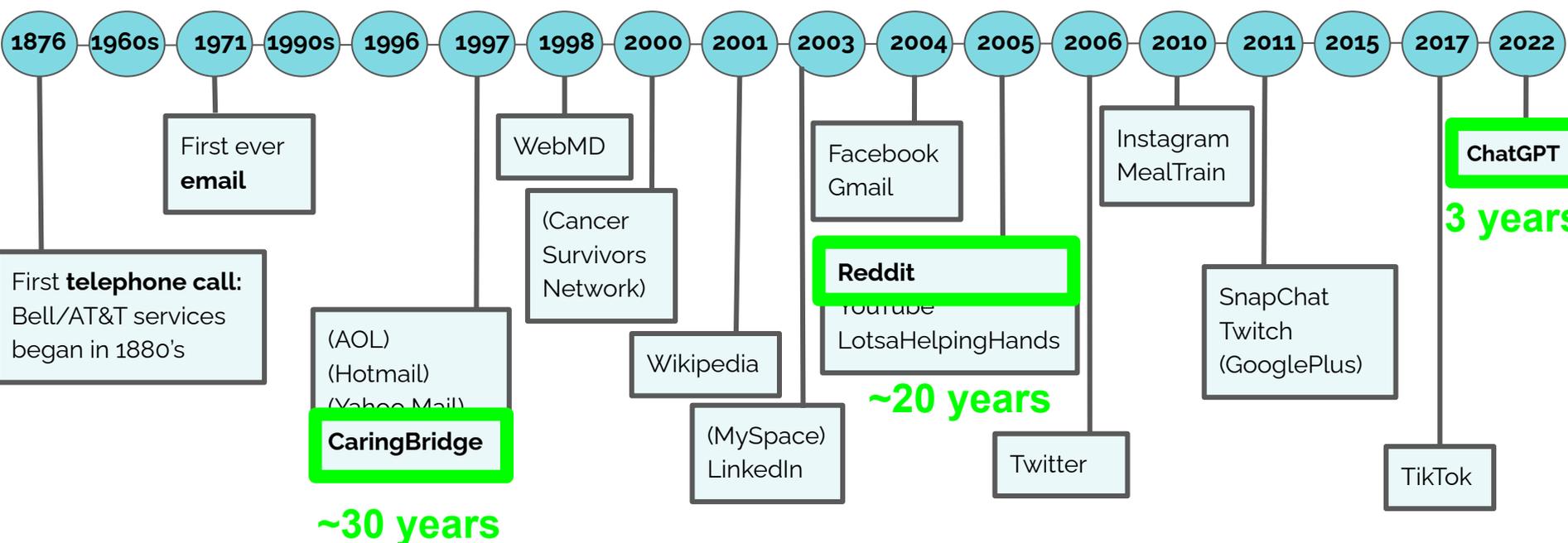
Question for the Chat:

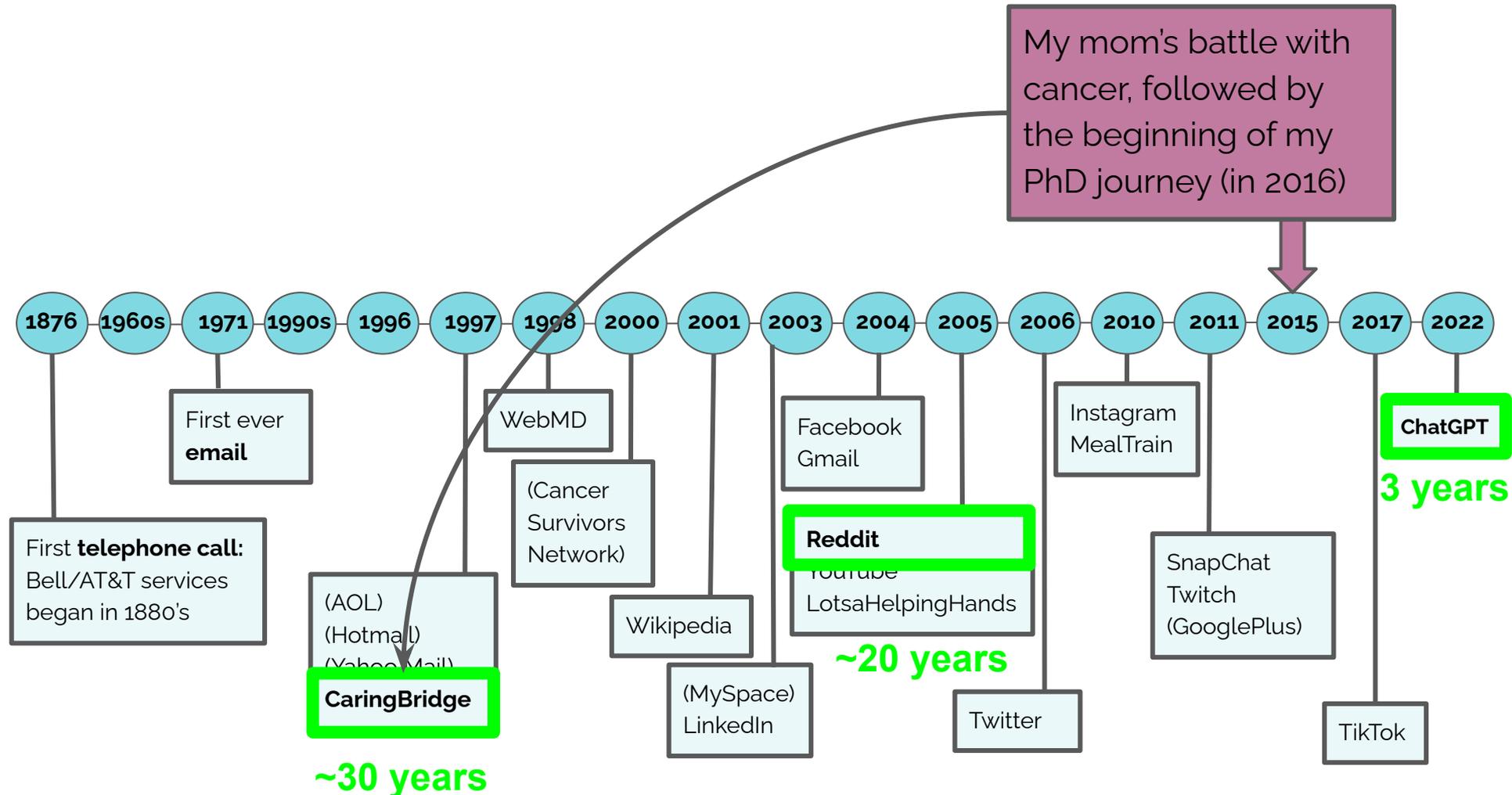
How has technology influenced your spiritual care practice in the past 5 years? How much of a say did you have in that?



A Bit of Sociotechnical Context

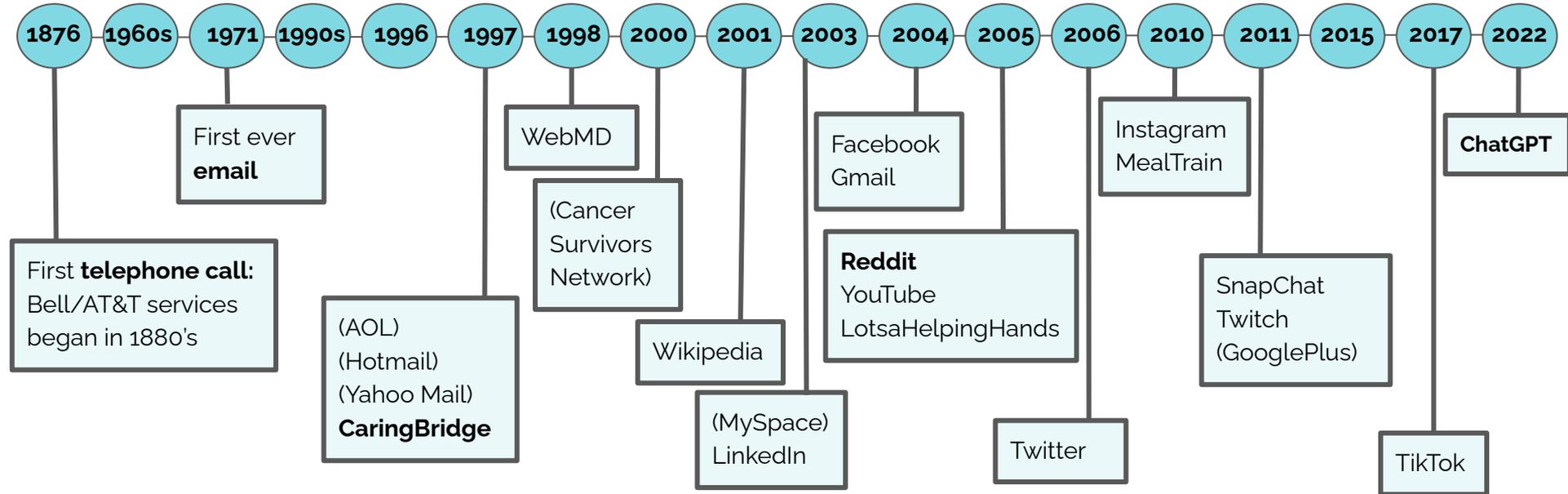
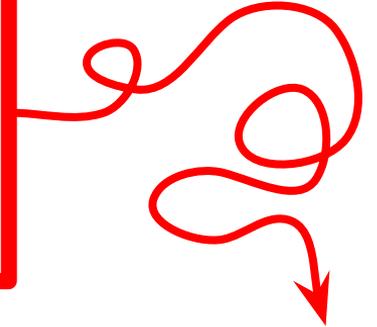






Covid-19 Pandemic starting in 2020 🧑‍⚕️

- Major shift toward **telehealth** across healthcare
- **New openness** to digital technologies in chaplaincy & spiritual care



What is the role of **technology** in transforming chaplaincy?

How can we ensure that technology for spiritual care is designed and deployed **ethically & effectively**?

HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN



In healthcare contexts: Elevated stakes & ethical considerations for technology deployments

Rather than a mindset of “**Build/Adopt What You Think Would Work**”...

Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) researchers study and evaluate technology stakeholders’ experiences, values, and needs before, during, and after building/launching sociotechnical systems

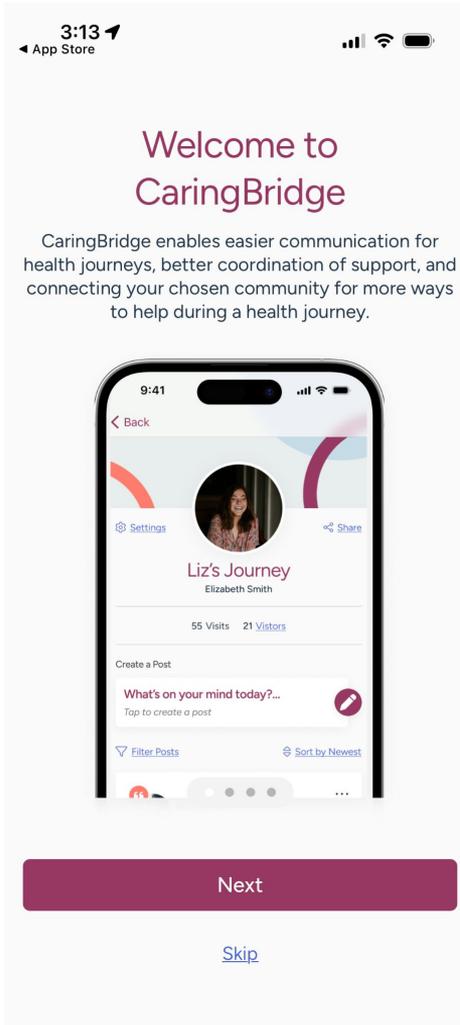
HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN

My Grand Vision:

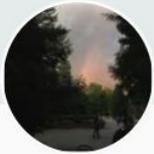
HCI Researchers & Spiritual Care Professionals
can join forces to create more nourishing
technologies for the human soul.



CaringBridge in the App Store



Nourishing resource for patients and caregivers navigating serious illness

**Christine Smith**

Christine Smith

1067 visits



[Redacted] Apr 22, 2015

April 22, 2015

Welcome to the Caring Bridge site for our friend and sister in Christ, Chris.

I haven't done this before, so if you have any advise for me, let me know!

In March, Chris became sick with abdominal pain and it was discovered that she had a mass on her uterus. She was referred to a specialist in St Paul to remove the tumor at the end of March. The cancer was identified as an Endometrial Stromal Sarcoma. Within a week, she was back in the hospital with complications from the surgery and it was noted that there were some nodules on the base of her lungs. She had further imaging, and biopsy showed that the sarcoma had spread to lungs making this a stage 4 high grade type of cancer. Her doctor was quite concerned because she had 2 separate CT's of the abdomen and pelvis (which includes the base of the lungs) about 3 weeks apart. The second scan showing nodules which were not there previously.

Endometrial Stromal Sarcoma is very (and I mean *VERY*) rare. It is a cancer of the smooth muscle and can occur in different parts of the body. According to her physician, this type of cancer is not curable at this stage/grade. It is a very aggressive cancer and resistant to chemotherapy. She was offered 2 chemotherapy agents to try to slow growth and spreading of the cancer.

Sharing Health Updates with Community



██████████ — 6/9/15

Christine please know I am thinking about you and praying that your journey home will be peaceful and painless. You are one of my oldest friends, we met at CCD! We were just 14 and I remember you as a confident, intelligent, and funny girl. and boy could you squeeze a dollar! I still don't know anyone who can stretch a dollar like you! Our lives have gone in different directions but have paralleled in so many ways! I wish your family peace and joy in the knowledge that you will be with God. I will miss you. I love you.

♡ React 💬 Reply

♡ 2



██████████ 6/9/15

Thank you ██████████ for creating this journal for Chris.

♡ React 💬 Reply



██████████ — 6/9/15

Chris...may God bring you a miracle. Thanksgiving and Christmas are not the same with out you. ██████████

♡ React 💬 Reply



██████████ — 6/9/15

Chris, we've had so many adventures together! Riding Segways, camp Lebanon, movies and music in the parks, talking about the Church and many, many more. I believe you are personally responsible for teaching the entire Holy Family parish cards! I Love you so much! You are such a great witness to our Faith. You have taught me and many others so much through your actions and prayers. I am praying for you and your family! Peace be with you my dear sister in Christ!!! <3

♡ React 💬 Reply



██████████ — 6/9/15

Loving prayers for you Chris.

♡ React 💬 Reply



██████████ — 6/9/15

I love you Chris. Praying for you with all my heart!

♡ React 💬 Reply

Receiving Supportive Communication, Coordinating Social Care

De [redacted] — 6/9/15

Christine please know I am thinking about you and praying that your journey home will be peaceful and painless. You are one of my oldest friends, we met at CCD! We were just 14 and I remember you as a confident, intelligent, and funny girl who always had a few bucks to stretch a dollar! I still don't know anyone who can stretch a dollar like you! Our lives have gone in different directions but have paralleled in so many ways! I wish your family peace and joy in the knowledge that you will be with God. I will miss you. I love you.

♡ React 💬 Reply

De [redacted] 6/9/15

Thank you [redacted] for creating this journal for Chris.

♡ React 💬 Reply

De [redacted] — 6/9/15

Chris... may God bring you a miracle. Thanksgiving and Christmas are not the same with out you. [redacted]

♡ React 💬 Reply

[Profile Picture] [redacted] — 6/9/15

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♡ React 💬 Reply

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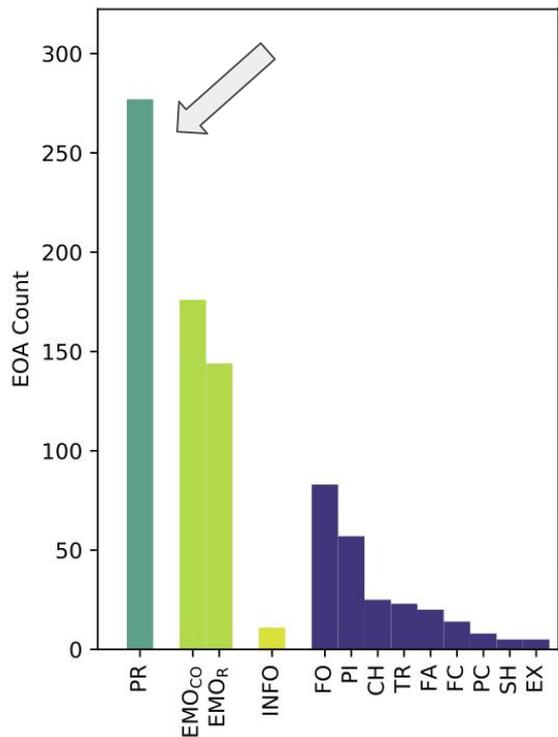
I love you Chris. Praying for you with all my heart!

♡ React 💬 Reply

Notice: Prayer and Religious/Spiritual Language
(Almost all comments in this particular example)

“Expressions of Appreciation”

(Measured through combo of computational methods + human annotation)



Survey of CaringBridge Users

(Likert Ratings of “Importance” of Support Type)

Patients/Caregivers Friends/Family

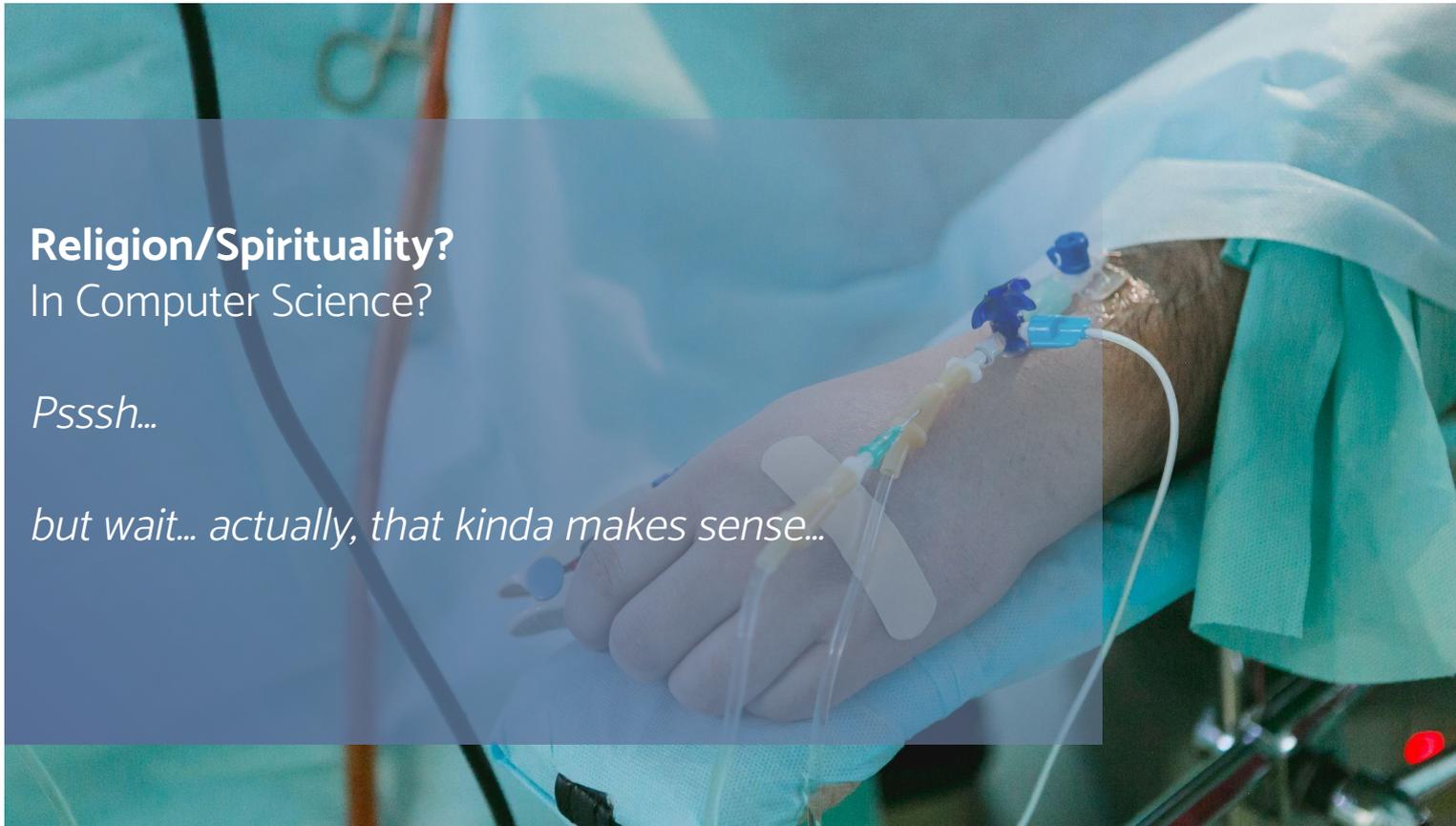
Support Type	P/CG ($m = 576$)	FFA ($n = 415$)
Prayer Support (PR)	$M = 3.18$ $SD = 1.14$	$M = 3.39$ $SD = 1.01$
Remote Emotional Support (EMO _R)	$M = 2.87$ $SD = 1.10$	$M = 3.10$ $SD = 0.94$
Instrumental Support (INSTR)	$M = 2.78$ $SD = 1.19$	$M = 2.73$ $SD = 1.24$
Co-located Emotional Support (EMO _{CO})	$M = 2.51$ $SD = 1.14$	$M = 2.70$ $SD = 1.15$
Informational Support (INFO)	$M = 2.26$ $SD = 1.23$	$M = 1.88$ $SD = 1.37$

HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN

Religion/Spirituality?
In Computer Science?

Psssh...

but wait... actually, that kinda makes sense...



What is Spiritual Support?

What is Spiritual Support and How Might It Impact the Design of Online Communities?

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KATIE Z. GACH, University of Colorado Boulder, USA

LOREN TERVEEN, GroupLens Research, Dept. Computer Science, University of Minnesota, USA

MARY JO KREITZER, Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing, UMN, USA

SUSAN O'CONNOR-VON, Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing, UMN, USA

Spirituality is an understudied topic in social computing; however, for Online Health Community (OHC) users facing life-threatening illness, it is of fundamental importance. Through in-depth focus groups with OHC stakeholders in a US context, we derive a definition of “spiritual support” for use by designers and researchers who study online social support. We show that spiritual support is an integral dimension that underlies other social support types, and that if we ignore spirituality in design, we fail to mitigate problematic issues that arise in online spaces when users’ spiritual values clash. Based on participants’ ideations, we provide design implications for OHCs and other social media to better facilitate spiritual support through: (1) representing spiritual beliefs, (2) assistance with supportive communication, (3) support network visualization and mobilization, and (4) advance care planning and digital legacy.

Began from **National Consensus Project** definition:

Spirituality

is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose, and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred.

Co-Design Workshops

n=34, held in late 2019

**CaringBridge Users
(n=11)**

**Spiritual & Religious
Leaders (n=6)**

**Healthcare
Workers (n=7)**

**CaringBridge
Employees (n=10)**

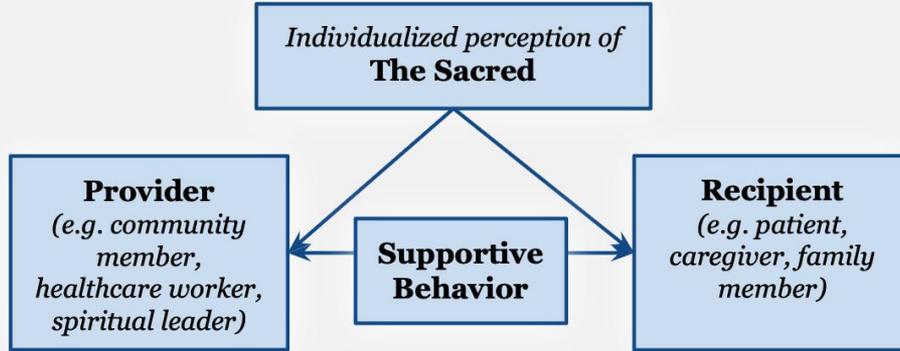
...including my first ever intros to a few chaplains! ❤️❤️❤️

What is your group's definition of spiritual support?

Someone, something or an experience acting as a catalyst to connect a person in need to a higher source - their perception of a loving spiritual source.

Structured **Small Group** Conversations & Technology Prototyping Activities

Definition of Spiritual Support (Smith, *et al.*, 2021)



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- **Informational**
- **Instrumental**
- **Esteem**
- **Emotional**
- **Network**
- **Prayer**

This dimension creates a **triadic relationship** between a recipient, a provider, and the sacred or significant, with the purpose of helping recipients and providers experience a **mutually positive presence** with each other and with the sacred or significant.



SPIRIT: A Design Framework To Support Technology Interventions for Spiritual Care Within and Beyond the Clinic

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Abstract

Despite its importance for well-being, spiritual care remains under-explored in HCI, while the adoption of technology in clinical spiritual care lags behind other healthcare fields. Prior work derived a definition of "spiritual support" through co-design workshops with stakeholders in online health communities. This paper contributes: (1) a revision of that definition through member checking with professional spiritual care providers (SCPs); (2) a novel design framework—SPIRIT—which can help to expand models of delivery for spiritual care using digital technologies. Through re-analysis of previous data and new interviews with SCPs, we identify three prerequisites for meaningful spiritual care: openness to care, safe space, and the ability to discern and articulate spiritual needs. We also propose six design dimensions: loving presence, meaning-making, appropriate degree of technology use, location, degree of relational closeness, and temporality. We discuss how SPIRIT offers guidance for designing impactful digital spiritual care intervention systems within and beyond clinical settings.

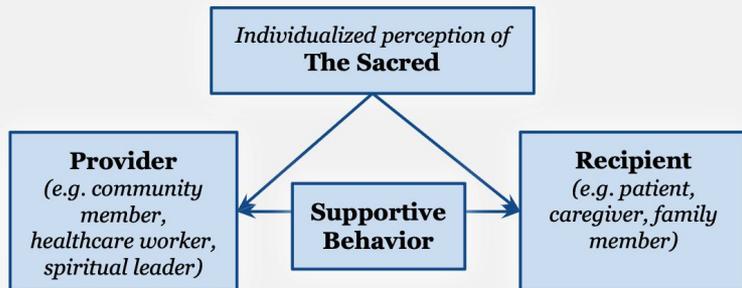
1 Introduction

Modern society is faced with epidemics of loneliness [41], mental illness [1, 45, 72, 97], and spiritual crises [30, 101]. The fields of HCI and medicine have focused predominantly on emotional and mental aspects of this issue, however spirituality and spiritual care are typically omitted or underdiscussed in the HCI research literature [19, 77, 85] and within patients' experiences of medical care [11, 29]. Humans experience *distinct* spiritual needs and problems during challenging or traumatic events and life-altering, -threatening, or terminal illness that are not well-addressed through mental and physical health care systems [75]. Moreover, spiritual factors are correlated with human wellbeing [56]. Thus, neglecting spiritual issues already constitutes a painful unmet need, and it may also invisibly impede progress or compliance with other types of interventions for mental or physical health. Receiving professional spiritual care (esp. during palliative care) has been repeatedly demonstrated to improve important health and Quality of Life outcomes [10, 11] and patient satisfaction with care [62] while also reducing overall costs of care [9]. Yet there are not enough profes-

Upcoming publication at the ACM CHI 2026 Conference in Barcelona, Spain.

- **“Member checking”** to ensure ongoing work is aligned with stakeholders
- **New interviews** with n=22 experienced, diverse spiritual care providers
 - **Validate** & possibly **update** our operational definition
- Combine new data with prior data from CaringBridge workshops to derive a **design framework** to support collaboration between technology designers & spiritual care providers

Definition of Spiritual Support (Smith, et al., 2021)

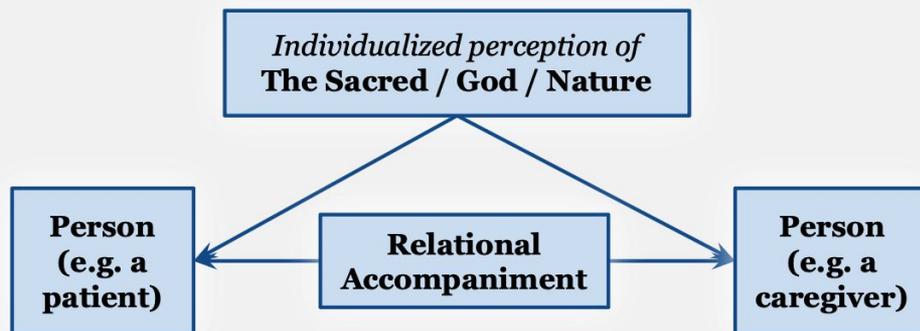


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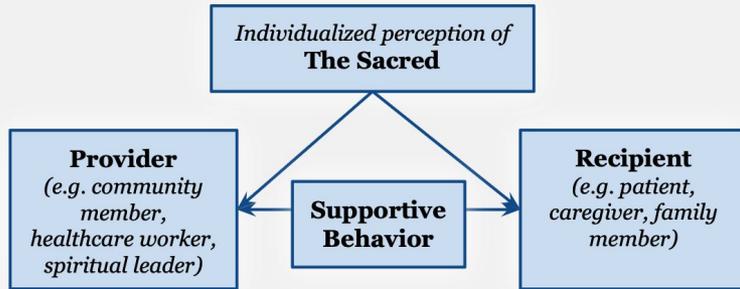
This dimension creates a **triadic relationship** between a recipient, a provider, and the sacred or significant, with the purpose of helping recipients and providers experience a **mutually positive presence** with each other and with the sacred or significant.

Revised Definition: **Spiritual Care**



SPIRITUAL CARE is a nourishing form of **social accompaniment** that supports actualization of a person's individualized sense of spirituality through meaning-making, purpose, and inner strength---without intent to fix or cure. This accompaniment creates a **triadic relationship** between multiple persons and the sacred or significant to create an experience of **mutually positive presence** with each other and with the sacred or significant. It can be expressed as an underlying dimension of conventional categories of social support such as informational, emotional, instrumental, network, esteem, prayer, or other types of ritual support and compassionate presence.

Definition of Spiritual Support (Smith, et al., 2021)

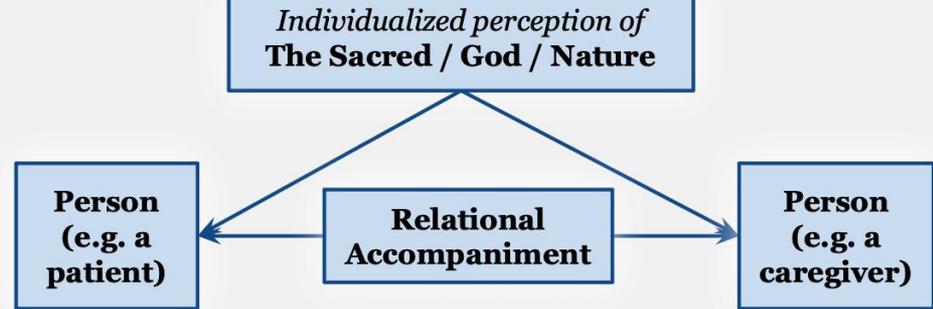


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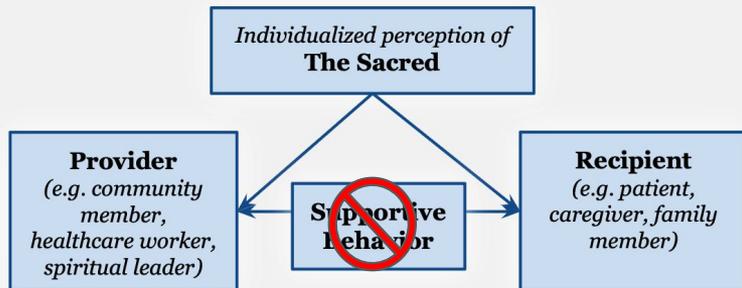
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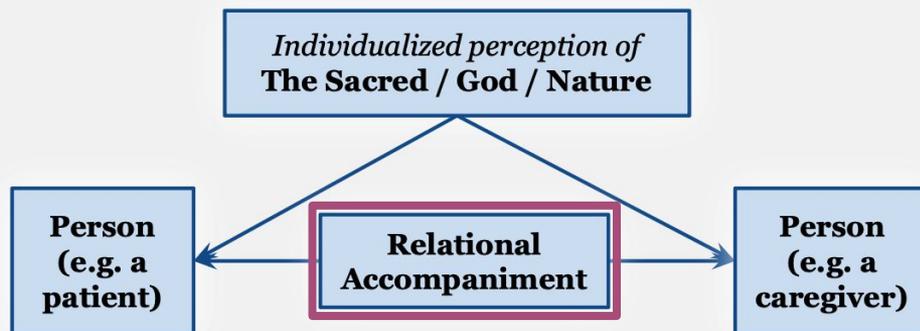


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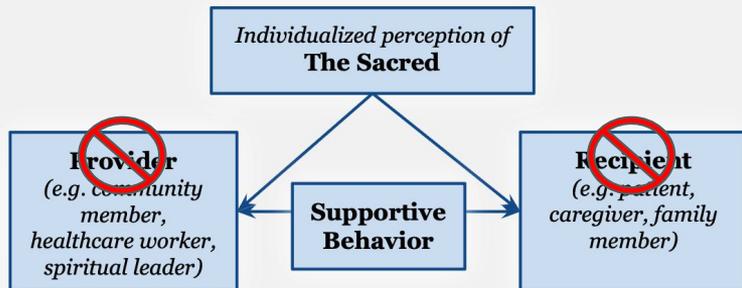
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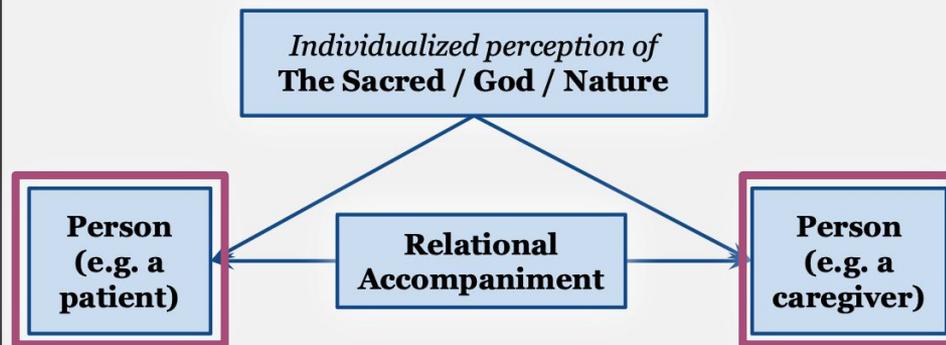


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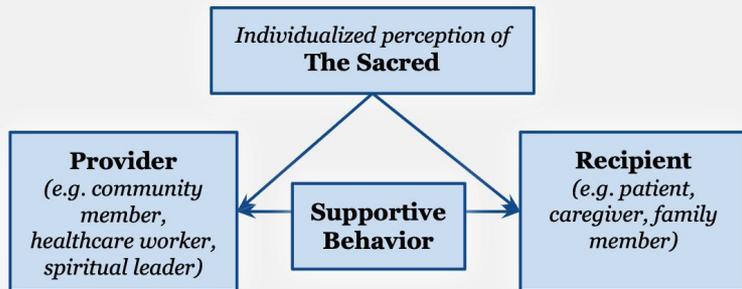
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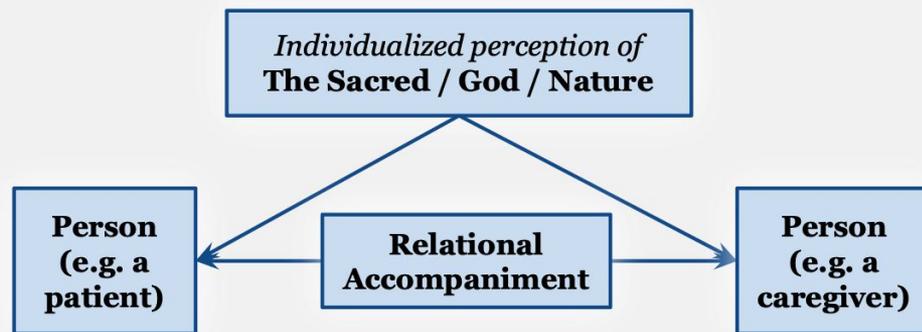


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SPiRiT Design Framework

Spiritual
Prerequisites &
Innovative
dimensions fo**R**
Integrating
Technology



Spiritual Prerequisites

Openness
to Care

Safe
Space

Ability to
Discern &
Articulate
Needs



6 Innovative **Design Dimensions** for Spiritual Care Tech

Technology	Presence	Meaning	Location	Relationship	Temporality
<i>The degree to which a human invention (e.g., pen & paper, the Internet, smartphones) must be involved for support exchange.</i>	<i>A quality of positive, intentional, and attuned presence between a person with themselves, others, and/or the significant/sacred.</i>	<i>The ability and capacity to make meaning out of pain, suffering, and other challenging circumstances of life & death.</i>	<i>Where support is being exchanged, whether in-person (geographic co-location, or remotely (at a distance).</i>	<i>The nature of the social relationship between supporter and recipient, and which values or elements of identity are shared (vs. not).</i>	<i>When the support exchanged is intended to occur (e.g., now, near or distant future).</i>
<p>Is technology required in order for the supportive interaction to exist?</p> <p>Is it required that technology be absent?</p>	<p>How can supporters cultivate a sense of genuine, connected presence with support recipient?</p> <p>What might contribute to a sense of emptiness or lack of presence? (e.g., "empty" thoughts & prayers)</p>	<p>What barriers are making it hard for the support recipient to make sense of the situation?</p> <p>What techniques, tools, and innate qualities help supporter/recipient to express spiritually healing narratives?</p>	<p>It is possible or necessary for supporter/recipient to be in the same location?</p> <p>Is there a specific location (geographical or online) where the support needs to take place?</p>	<p>How well do these people know each other? (e.g., spouses, acquaintances, strangers)</p> <p>What expectations, history, and responsibilities exist between them, if any?</p>	<p>Is support needed urgently, or very soon?</p> <p>Is support intended to occur at an unpredictable or predetermined future moment?</p>

Four Levels of “Design Briefs” :

Borrowed from HCI research in digital mental health (Slovak & Munson, 2024)

1. **Technical capabilities:** individual features or affordances of interaction design
2. **Components:** incorporate one or more capabilities to deliver a particular design element;
3. **Intervention systems:** combine multiple components into a complete intervention
4. **Intervention implementations:** can be deployed with trained clinicians in specific institutional settings

Spiritual Care Technologies:

Envision **components** for phases of care



Needs
Assessment

E.g., Screening (by generalists or other staff), and formal needs assessment (by specialists) using tools like Spiritual AIM, HOPE, FICA, etc.

Intervention

**Advocate Health Care
Taxonomy of Chaplaincy**
(Massey 2015)

Outcomes
Assessment

Big Opportunity Here!

Less established – see emerging tools such as “Feeling Heard and Understood” scale (Ahluwalia 2022)

For Example: A Novel Needs Assessment Component

AI-Based Screening Tool

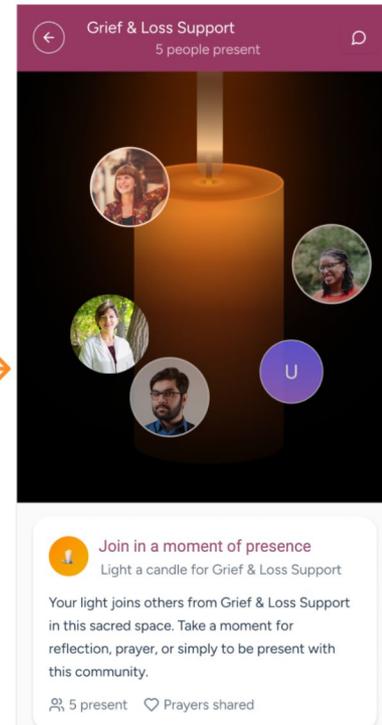
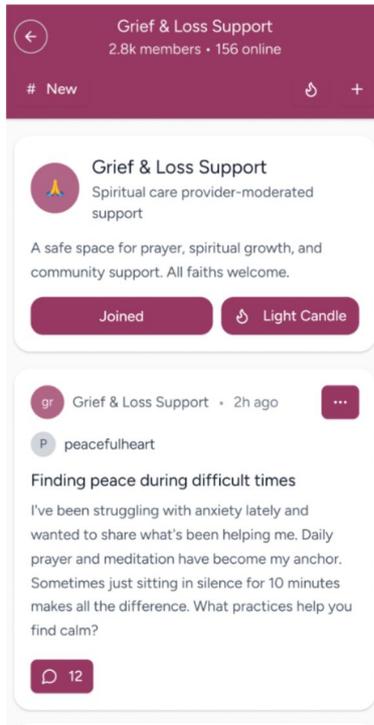
The screenshot displays a four-panel user interface for an AI-based screening tool. The first panel, titled "Welcome to [Blinded]", includes a video player showing a person with the word "[Blinded]" overlaid, and a series of text-based questions about the user's interest in spiritual care. The second panel shows a chat conversation where the user expresses interest, and the AI responds with a question about the user's current struggles. The third panel, "Connect with a Chaplain", lists three chaplains: Sarah Martinez, David Chen, and Emily Johnson, each with a brief bio and a "Request Conversation" button. The fourth panel, "Schedule Your Conversation", allows the user to select a date and time, provide contact information, and choose a preferred contact method. It also includes a section for "What would you like support with?" with several checkboxes and a "Support Network (Optional)" section.

Want to try it out and provide feedback? Email me at estellesmith@mines.edu!

For Example: A Novel Intervention Component



Online Spiritual Care Communities



For Example:
A Novel Intervention
Component



CARINGBRIDGE™

Online Spiritual Care Communities

Referring online users to standard care

“Encourage to seek support,” e.g., provide direct links, referrals, or resources to connect users with healthcare professionals, hotlines, etc.

Institutionally-Based Formal Care

Traditional care (in-person or virtual). Subject to medical liability, HIPAA constraints, insurance, financial structures, regulatory training.

Platform-Based Community Care

Informal care in online communities. Currently unclear financial accountability & not subject to traditional medical constraints, training, regulation. Requires careful future work.

Recommending patients for
supplementary online community support

E.g., clinicians provide information on trusted online communities and integrating these options into care plans.

For Example:
Novel Context for Needs
Assessment / Intervention



r/cancer

Hot ▾ □ ▾

Community highlights

Welcome to **/R/Cancer**, sorry you're here. Please read **submitting any posts!**
151 votes · 0 comments

u/jazzed-in · 10 hr. ago

Radiation therapy is just as bad as chemotherapy for me

I hate it. I hate it. I hate it. No one has ever told me about the side effects. They told me it's not gonna be as bad as chemotherapy, and they're so wrong. In my experience at least. I literally can't eat for about a week now. My mouth that feel like there's a thousand of them. My throat also hurts. I can't swallow food and drink water. I can't even brush my teeth now because every time I put something inside my mouth, it leaves me in tears because of the pain.

Patient

55 ↓ 38 1 Share

u/Kremlin7613 · 17 hr. ago

Why does no one tell you about what happens after

(This is just a rant) I want to express the difficulties I faced during my illness that were not adequately explained to me beforehand. The impact on my physical appearance after chemotherapy, and the countless painkillers I had to take were all unexpected.

r/lonely

Best ▾ □ ▾

Community highlights

Weekly Find a Friend thread -
October 03, 2025
3 votes · 29 comments

Remind me about social media
1.9K votes

u/Ashamed_Art5445 · 1 hr. ago

I'm sick of people who have companionship, then they leave with being totally alone

Title is all, people who have people, should not give advice to people who are alone.

Venting

15 ↓ 5 1 Share

u/FriendlyThreader · 25 days ago

Loneliness feels heavier with age

I'm 36 and recently I've been noticing how much lonelier and more isolated I feel.

r/SuicideWatch

Hot ▾ □ ▾

Create post Join ...

Peer support for anyone struggling with suicidal thoughts
Peer support for anyone struggling with suicidal thoughts.

488K Members 44 Online

RESOURCES

The SW Mod team also maintains [/r/SWResources](#).

If you need help for yourself, we've got a [directory of voice and chat/text hotline services](#) and [FAQs about hotlines](#), plus [selected online resources](#).

If you're concerned about someone else, you're welcome to post, also check out our [talking tips](#) and [risk assessment guide](#). If you're new here and want to help, please read these two posts before diving in.

If you've lost someone to suicide, [/r/SuicideBereavement](#) is there for you, or you can check out [our shared list of bereavement resources](#).

Note: the Android Reddit app currently has a bug that causes wikis not to work - if links

u/SQLwitch MOD · 5 yr. ago

New wiki on how to avoid accidentally encouraging suicide, and how to spot covert incitement

We've been seeing a worrying increase in pro-suicide content showing up here and, and also going unreported. This undermines our purpose here, so we wanted to highlight and clarify our guidelines about both direct and indirect incitement of suicide. We've created a wiki that covers these issues. We hope this will be helpful to...

1.8K ↓ 248 1 Share

u/SQLwitch MOD · 3 yr. ago

Please remember that NO ACTIVISM of any kind is ever allowed here. No matter what day it is.

Activism, i.e. advocating or fundraising for social change or raising awareness of social issues (and suicide is, inescapably, a social issue) is absolutely against the rules here at all times. Please understand that we're all for smart, strategic mental-health and suicide-prevention activism. It's essential to fight against stigma...

716 ↓ 43 1 Share

u/funnyhowlifehappens · 12 hr. ago

I'm facing jail time and can't cope

People say own up and deal with your consequences but I can't. I'm not one of those people. I'm being charged with a THC DUI and even fighting it in court is costing me everything. My jobs as a nurse and nurse practitioner. My relationship with an urgent care doctor and that I just started dating off bumble. My apartment that cost \$2 grand a month. Idk how I'll pay for it and become so disrespected by everyone if I can't get it dropped. Which



**“Thousands of people are here [online], saying hey, I need support. But my pastor friends are sitting in empty desks.”
(P08)**

“Similar to what's been known as street ministry, this could be a future opportunity in spiritual care---Reddit ministry. A Reddit chaplain.” (P16)

What is the role of **technology** in transforming chaplaincy?

How can we ensure that technology for spiritual care is designed and deployed **ethically & effectively**?

Designing for Spiritual Innovation: *Exploring Futures for Digital Chaplaincy through the SPIRIT Design Framework*

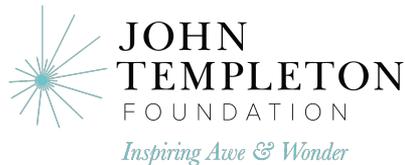
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Poster at **AAHPM**
in San Diego
(March 4-6!)
Let's chat!



Manuscript Preprint + Today's Slides →

<https://estellesmithphd.com/publications/>

