



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Spiritual growth in cancer patients: a qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explain spiritual growth and explore its dimensions in patients with cancer. In this qualitative study, conventional content analysis was used for collection and analysis of data. The 12 patients that qualified for this study were selected from among patients with different types of cancer, referred to the two large teaching cancer hospitals in Tehran. Six main themes and 11 subthemes were extracted. The main themes included: "return to self", "tend to spirituality", "human perfection", "inner peace", "a fresh outlook on death", and "closeness to God." Cancer patients dramatically turn to spirituality, and use it as a powerful tool to adjust with the disease. The emerging new themes brought to light new aspects of consequences of cancer that can help care providers to enhance growth and improve patients' compliance with the stressful event of cancer.

Keywords: Cancer, Spiritual growth

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INTRODUCTION

Cancer is a life-threatening disease, and its diagnosis and treatment can be a stressful experience for the individual. Usual complications of cancer such as fear, loneliness, threat of death, vague prospect, changes in relationships, and having to bear painful medical procedures[1] can be considered stressful for the patient.

As a stressful event, cancer can also cause positive changes besides its negative effects[2]. In fact, diagnosis and treatment of cancer can create huge amount of stress, which itself provides the ground for a phenomenon known as "growth"[3]. Results of studies on consequences of cancer indicate that many cancer survivors have experienced positive changes during their illness[4-7].

One of the changes reported in cancer patients is positive spiritual change. Research shows that when people are exposed to stressful events and incurable diseases like cancer, they turns to religion and spirituality[8-9], and often use spirituality as a means of coping with stress[8-10]. In these circumstances, spirituality helps people to maintain their health; it may even lead to positive psychological effects[9, 11]. Spirituality is a dimension of human that seeks meaning and goal, and a path that people experience their relationship with time, self, others, and God[12].

Religion and spirituality are important influential factors that affect quality of life, quality of care and satisfaction[13-17]. Spirituality can also affect people's adjustment with incurable diseases. In a study by

Choumanova et al.[18] in Latin America, it was found that spirituality was an important coping strategy in breast cancer patients. Previous studies in Iran also show that Iranian cancer patients turned to spirituality more than anything else to cope with the disease[8-9].

Patients require a holistic approach to care, and nurses should consider spiritual dimension of patients. Spirituality can play an important role in improving patients that suffer from physical and mental diseases[19]. There is little information about spiritual aspects of care, and therefore, addressing spiritual care of cancer patients requires benchmarking different aspects of spirituality, when people are affected by the disease. Recognition and understanding spiritual beliefs and behaviors in cancer patients that are rooted in the cultural texture of the society[20] can help nurses in development and implementation of care programs. Since spiritual growth is considered a highly abstract concept, it is difficult to accurately define and recognize its components, using a quantitative approach, as this approach cannot both reveal content and details of beliefs and identify underlying differences that form these beliefs. Hence, it is necessary to use qualitative approach to explore different aspects of spirituality and spiritual growth.

Study of different aspects of spirituality in cancer patients in the Iranian society can provide nurses, care providers, and the clergy with useful information to help them adjust with their disease, and even grow. Furthermore, spirituality is a multidimensional concept that has no single definition[21] and is affected by many factors, including culture[20]. This study aims to explain spiritual growth and explore its dimensions in Iranian cancer patients, to provide a suitable guide for health care providers in planning care.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this qualitative study, conventional content analysis approach was used. Data were collected from 12 patients referred to two teaching cancer centers in Tabriz over a 9-month period. Participants were patients that were diagnosed with a variety of cancers and had undergone treatment for the past year. Purposeful sampling continued until data saturation[22]. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Every interview began with general questions (e.g. what effect has cancer had on your life? What religious and spiritual changes have happened to you? How has the disease affected non-material issues in you?), and pursued with a flexible framework. Process of interview depended on participants' response. To obtain rich and clear data, probing questions were used, such as: "could you elaborate on this?", "could you be more specific?", or "could you give an example?"

To analyze the data, interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Next, interviews were coded, reviewed, and analyzed using content analysis approach, in which each interview has to be read several times to obtain an overall impression. Important statements were underlined to identify conceptual units or initial codes that indicate spiritual growth. Similar conceptual units were summarized in categories, and ultimately, main themes were extracted. Data were analyzed as they were collected, which continued until saturation.

To enhance credibility and rigor of data, key informants were used (people with minimum of one year's experience of living with cancer). To ensure validity, the third author separately examined the data, and arrived at similar codes and categories. Periodic meetings of colleagues (1st, 2nd, and 3rd authors) were held to reach consensus on themes through discussion. Moreover, interview text and initial codes were approved by participants. To increase credibility, member check and allocation of sufficient time for collection of data were also used.

This study was approved by the ethics committee of Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences. Patients were fully informed of objectives and methods of study, and to comply with principles of autonomy, optional participation in the study was announced, verbal and written consents and permission to record interviews were obtained, and confidentiality of data was assured.

RESULTS

A total of 12 patients were interviewed. Participants ranged from 30 to 58 years old, 4 of whom were female and 8 were male. Five subjects had university education. Three had breast cancer, 4 colorectal, 1 testicular, 2 leukemia, 1 pelvic, and 1 oral cancer. Six main themes and eleven subthemes were obtained (table 1). Main themes included "return to self", "tend to spirituality", "human perfection", "inner peace", "a fresh outlook on death", and "closeness to God" that are explained below.

1. Return to self: Cancer causes patients to leave external attachments in life and return to inner world of self. Return to self consists of two subthemes: "self-assessment" and "self-construction."

Self assessment: Once affected by the disease, patients tend to evaluate themselves and their lives, and try to choose another path if they realize they have been diverted from the straight path in life. This requires constant and deep revision of moods and behaviors.

"This disease made me realize I was going the wrong way.... I feel I'm on human transcendental path."

Self-construction: As well as realizing their shortcomings, patients tried to achieve an idealized mental picture.

"The disease woke me up... path of my life has changed... I want to be a good person."

2. **Tend to spirituality:** Cancer made patients more aware of their spiritual side, so they consider spirituality an inseparable part of their lives. This theme includes "seeking meaning", "meaningful attitude" and "raising spirituality" subthemes.

Seeking meaning: This involved patients' search for a meaning of having cancer. Some patients considered forgiveness of sins the true meaning in life, with stressful conditions due to cancer, and others considered living with cancer a divine test:

"I didn't see my death without reward, and believed I was going to the other world with some savings."

"God wants me closer to him in this way."

Meaningful attitude: While attending to appearances, patients also considered spiritual content and consequences of issues. In fact, in all issues in life, patients considered spiritual consequences top priority. Before cancer, they used to think more about material benefits in anything.

"The disease made me think less about material side and turn to spiritual side of things more. My spouse and I have promised to warn each other if we digress from the right path and prioritize material things, and to direct each other onto the right path."

"In all aspects, I try not to consider the material dimension only and attend to spiritual side, too."

Raising spirituality: In participants' view, the disease has awakened their spiritual side, and has increased their spiritual beliefs.

"My beliefs have increased and I obey God more."

3. **Human perfection:** Cancer changes the path and priorities of life in cancer patients, and they gradually attempt to alleviate ethical shortfalls.

This theme comprises two subthemes: "purification of soul" and "accentuation of human attributes."

Purification of soul: According to some patients, cancer made them purer, and they turned to virtue while trying to make up for their past deeds.

"Well, I had lost my way, and I was in two minds- I liked to pray, but I wasn't very committed and didn't behave much. But now, I try to be better and improve myself."

"I used to drink a lot, now I am on the wagon."

Accentuation of human attributes: patients revealed that after struggling with cancer, in addition to purification of soul, human attributes, such as: positive thinking, strength, endurance and fortitude, devotion, pray for others, hard work, spirit of effort, sacrifice, charity, good will to others, and generosity have become more accentuated in them.

"I used to be a very spiteful person before, and it was hard for me to forgive anyone, but I have changed, and don't bear a grudge against anybody. I'm not jealous, and don't care about whatever people around me have or not have. I tried hard to change my morals, and I am more patient now."

"I used to have a very negative attitude toward many things, but now my views have changed and look at things positively."

4. **Inner peace:** Participating patients revealed that the disease has made them achieve inner peace, and experience such tranquility they had not before the disease. Also, unlike before, they were no longer anxious and restless about life affairs.

"We could see that I have evolved into a peaceful person... Praying to God comforts me, and makes me feel light and peaceful."

5. **Fresh outlook on death:** After cancer, patients saw death nearing, and prepared themselves for it.

"I thank God for helping me to get through life well. When I look back, I feel happy with my life. Now, if he thinks it right, he can take my life."

6. **Closeness to God:** In explaining life with cancer, patients cited their relationship with God. Struggling with cancer caused patients to seek refuge in God, and gradually established a deep inner relationship with God. This two-way relationship was felt in every moment of their lives. This theme comprises two sub-themes: "trust" and "God-centered."

Trust: Participants considered the disease and its treatment God's will and wisdom, and felt surrendered to God. They relied on God in all stages of illness.

"I believe the world is managed by the divine intelligence, and leaf doesn't fall off a tree without his say so. Nothing is without wisdom, and everything is influenced by God"

"I trust in God, and try to do that in everything"

God-centered: Patients considered themselves very close to God and supported by him. Most of them prayed before, but their perfunctory and aimless prayers had changed to a loving and two-way relationship with God now.

"It made me know God... I always feel God near me and feel his grace."

“I believe in God and know how much he supports me.”

“I wasn’t very committed before, and prayed daily only because of being a Muslim, but now I pray with love.”

Table 1: Main themes and subthemes extracted from interviews with cancer patients

Main themes	Sub-themes
Return to self	Self assessment
	Self-construction
tend to spirituality	Seeking meaning
	Meaningful attitude
	Raising spirituality
human perfection	Purification of soul
	Accentuating positive human attributes
Inner peace	Inner peace
Fresh outlook on death	Fresh outlook on death
Closeness to God	Trust
	God centered

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Results of present study that was conducted to explain spiritual growth and explore its dimensions in cancer patients showed that participants considered the disease as a growth phenomenon that had caused positive spiritual changes in them. It has been frequently cited in Islamic literature that hardships and disasters can lead to human growth. According to a contemporary Islamic philosopher, hardships and difficulties prepare the individual and stimulate human determination, and makes human more determined and active [23].

Compared to other studies in which spirituality has had the lowest priority among different dimensions of growth[24-26], in this study, it was found that patients have achieved self-actualization by taking successive spiritual growth steps. In mysticism, obstacles and problems are considered constructive opportunities and factors for growth, so that, suffering, failure, and defects are excuses for ascending to transcendence and compensating for these short falls [27].

One of the themes in this study is “return to self” that forced them to evaluate themselves and recognize their positive and negative points in life, and to try to alleviate negative points in their remaining years. Self-recognition and identifying weak points is necessary for correction and self-construction. Thus, patients that face cancer as a life-threatening stress, try to make up for past mistakes, and present as a virtuous person before God. This theme was not cited in previous studies [4, 28-30].

Another theme found in this study was “tend to spirituality” in cancer patients. Before their illness, patients were engaged in material life and prioritized their physical, mental, and social needs, and paid less attention to spirituality. But, disease distanced them from material life and made them attend to higher and spiritual dimensions. Meanwhile, sometimes they are so involved in these issues that spirituality overshadows other aspects of life. Seeking meaning is among main strategies for coping with stressful conditions. A noteworthy point was that Iranian cancer patients sought meaning of life only in spiritual and heavenly matters, and their plan for the rest of their lives was formed accordingly; This contradicts Franckle’s perspective[31] that considered whatever gave a person hope to continue life, as meaning of life (including material matters). Previous studies also cited the point that cancer patients benefited from spiritual support for adjustment with the disease[28, 8-9].

The third theme in this study was “human transcendence”, which was not mentioned in previous studies[4, 28-30]. With tendency toward spirituality, patients attempt to make up for past mistakes, and improve their personal characteristics, so that, most mentioned positive characteristics such as positive thinking, strength, endurance, fortitude, patience, devotion, praying for others, hard work, spirit of effort, sacrifice, charity, and generosity.

A theme emphasized by all patients was two-way relationship and closeness to God. Diagnosis and treatment of cancer create many physical and mental problems for the individual, and people tend to turn to God to cope with this problem and gradually establish a deep inner relationship with God. They feel this two-way relationship in every moment of their lives. In fact by thinking about God, they feel and experience fewer problems like loneliness, severe depression, and vague prospect. By belief in destiny, divine test, absolving sins, and reliance on God, they accept the circumstances easier. Some patients advanced relationship with God to an extent that described praying to God the most pleasurable moments in life. Previous studies also mention relationship with and support of God[8-9, 28-29].

Another theme in this study was “inner peace”, also mentioned in Denney *et al.*[28] study. In this two-way relationship, patients see God as their kind soul-mate, and feel God listen to them and understand their suffering. They considered God as a kind friend beside them and found such tranquility that they had not

before the disease, due to lack of attention to God. Accepting death was another positive consequence of struggling with cancer, so that patients considered death a God's will and prepared for it.

Although most previous studies mention positive consequences of people's spirituality in struggling with stressful events[8-9, 28-29], themes obtained in this study are much more comprehensive, with more complete subthemes. In the study by Fallah *et al.*[29], only "closeness to God" including "God-centered" and "trust in God" was similar to those in the present study, and no mention was made to other themes found in this study including: "return to self", "seeking meaning", "purification of soul", "accentuation of positive human attributes", "raising spirituality", "fresh outlook on death", and "inner peace."

The study by Denney *et al.*[28] that specifically examined spiritual growth in cancer patients is very similar to the present study in many ways. Comparison of the two studies shows that unlike the study by Denney *et al.* that only cites spiritual changes in beliefs and mentality, in the present study, in addition to spiritual mental growth, spiritual growth was found at the highest level, which was "practical action" for transforming into human perfection. In other words, in addition to causing changes in mentality, growth also initiates effect in practice. As evidence for the above theory, emerging themes "return to self", "purification of soul", and "accentuation of positive human attributes", can be mentioned.

Results of this study showed, given governing cultural and religious backgrounds in Iranian society, cancer patients make a dramatic turn to spirituality, and use it as a powerful tool for adjusting with the disease. Spirituality makes patients purposeful, strong and full of vitality, so that, not only can they cope with the disease, but also sometimes they are happy that this stressful event has happened, which is beyond the level before the disease. Emergence of new themes showed some of the new aspects of consequences of cancer in Iranian society that can help development of meaning of "spirituality" in nursing science and have clinical applications in this discipline. It is recommended that care providers, including nurses, psychologists, and even the clergy use potential grounds for spiritual growth, in line with better coping of these patients with the stressful event of cancer.

This study was conducted on Iranian Muslim cancer patients, and results cannot be generalized to patients of other faiths or societies.

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