



When Consciousness Recognizes Itself: Narcotics Anonymous Members' Experiences of Spiritual Awakening in Southeast Iran

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Abstract

Introduction: The 12-step Narcotics Anonymous (NA) program can provide support for the recovery of people with substance use disorder. This organization considers spirituality as the most important factor in fighting temptations and finding ways for long-term improvement through personal change and spiritual awakening. Thus, this study was conducted in southeast Iran to explore the lived experiences of the members of Narcotics Anonymous and to clarify what spiritual awakening means to them.

Methods: This is a hermeneutic phenomenological study inspired by Ricoeur's philosophy and explained by Lindseth and Norberg. The participants were asked to narrate their experiences of spiritual awakening via in-depth semi-structured interviews. Interpretation of transcribed interviews was performed in three stages: naïve understanding, structural analysis, and comprehensive understanding.

Results: The present study showed spiritual awakening in the NA members can be considered as opening the doors of perception to a higher reality. This theme consists of seven subthemes, including (1) Being accepted and embraced by fellow pain sufferers through their very presence, (2) Being connected to a higher power and freedom from self-centeredness, (3) Self-reorganization and acceptance through self-reflective practice, (4) Taking responsibility by stopping making excuses and starting making changes, (5) Cultivating a culture of continuous care, (6) Connecting with the true self and spreading unconditional love, and (7) Living in the flow of life and learning from nature.

Conclusion: Following the principles of the 12-step program, the NA members managed to recover from addiction, fill their existential voids, and become loving people who have accepted guidance and have surrendered. Conducting qualitative studies and reflecting on the experiences of people who have recovered from addiction is a source of knowledge that can be a guide to implementing preventive measures and medical interventions for other addicts, the general public, and healthcare providers.

Keywords: Substance-related disorders, Qualitative research, Hermeneutics, Spirituality

Introduction

Substance use disorder (SUD) is one of the most significant health issues throughout the world (1), causing a variety of difficulties such as an increase in infectious diseases, accidents, behavioral problems, attention deficit, suicide, and murder (2). According to the statistics provided by the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly 450000 people lost their lives to substance use in 2015 (3). According to the announcement of the Drug Control Headquarters (DCHQ) in 2017, the number of addicts in Iran had reached 2808000 and 3190 people died of drug abuse in the same year (4). Considering the fact that drug use disorder is known as a chronic and recurrent disease, it requires constant care and support leading to high costs (5). Therefore, 12-step-based mutual aid programs such as Narcotics Anonymous (NA) can provide necessary and cost-effective support for the rehabilitation of these people (6). NA is an international fellowship based on the 12-step program, which was established in Southern California in 1950 (7). This fellowship is an abstinence-based program that has been inspired by the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) recovery program (8). NA is a nonprofessional organization and has no affiliation with other organizations. Joining this organization is free of charge and voluntary and the only membership requirement is a desire to stop using narcotics (9).

NA was established in 1990 in Iran. According to the NA World Service office, 70065 weekly meetings are held in 139 countries across the world. A total of 27677 of these meetings are held in the U.S., and 21974 are held in Iran (8). This organization considers addiction as a physical, mental, and spiritual disease that is accompanied by self-centeredness, lack of understanding of spiritual needs, and lack of meaning in life (10). Therefore, spirituality is the most critical factor in fighting temptations to use drugs and successful improvements in the 12-step program (11). Spirituality is viewed as the essence of the individual's being, which permeates their lives and grants them an awareness of who and what they are, their purpose in life, and their inner resources and shapes their life journey (12). In fact, spirituality is concerned with meaning and purpose in life, with truth, and with values (13, 14). The 12-step program focuses on helping the individuals to

establish a connection with God, in any way they perceive Him, and to have a conscious relationship with Him through prayers and meditation (2). Addicts are the core and heart of NA and they come together aiming to help one another to abstain from using drugs, avoid temptations, and find a way for long-term improvement through personal change and spiritual awakening. Although spiritual awakening emerges differently in different members of the fellowship, they all have some common aspects including eliminating the feeling of loneliness and creating a direction in life. It is believed that spiritual awakening is the direct consequence of employing the 12-step program in daily life (9).

Previous studies have highlighted the role of spirituality as a factor for recovery from addiction (5, 11, 15, 16). Based on earlier studies, promoting spirituality in users can lead to recovery from substance abuse by enhancing self-confidence, self-efficacy (14), forgiveness, and purpose in life (17), filling the existential voids and achieving a sense of meaning in life (10), providing peace, and gaining a new perspective of life (18). In a review study conducted by Dermatis and Galanter in 2016, focusing on the role of spirituality and religion in 12-step programs and long-term improvement, it was stated that feeling God's constant presence, believing in a higher power as a universal spirit, and contributing in the fellowship were predictive of positive outcomes concerning the improvement of members (19). In a qualitative study conducted by Delucia et al. in 2015, the participants pointed to enhancement of well-being and personal and spiritual health, improvement in relationships, and achieving freedom as the functions of the 12 steps, as the primary characteristics of the program. They also declared that filling the void resulting from drug rehabilitation with spirituality had led to obtaining spiritual awakening, reaching the ideal self, and reducing self-centeredness. Furthermore, the participants mentioned the crucial role of responsibility and persistence in recovery from addiction (20).

Numerous studies have also emphasized the necessity of conducting research based on the participants' experiences of recovery from addiction in order to achieve a comprehensive, integrated, and patient-centered health care system for treating

addiction (21-23). One suitable method focusing on people's personal experiences and perception of their experiences is the qualitative phenomenological approach (24, 25). This approach can indicate the meaning of an individual's experiences and reveal universally useful facts that can be informative and instructive for others with diverse cultures (26). However, despite the emphasis on studies based on experiences of improvement and spirituality in treating addiction, the researchers did not find any research conducted in Iran using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. There are few researches conducted in other countries. Therefore, this study was carried out to compensate for this lack to some extent aiming at reaching a deeper understanding of the experience of spiritual awakening during the process of recovery with an emphasis on the significance of the 12 steps.

Methods

This study aimed to clarify the meaning of spiritual awakening and explore the lived experiences of the members of Narcotics Anonymous (NA), and in this regard, it focused on the function of the 12-step program in members' recovery from addiction in the southeast of Iran.

Design

The study was a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological one based on the interpretation theory introduced by Lindseth and Norberg to interpret the transcripts of the interviews (27). This method is basically the study of lived experiences or life-world. Phenomenology is concerned with the world as lived by a person, not the world or reality apart from humans. Therefore, it puts forth the question of what kind of experience the lived experience is. This is because phenomenology tries to reveal meanings as lived in daily life (28). Hermeneutic phenomenology does not exclude the fundamentals and positive assumptions, but it includes them in an interpretive process. In this case, the researchers are expected to reflect on their experiences and then present the aspects of their experiences that are related to the subject of study in a comprehensible way. Therefore, the final results of the study are based on the researcher's personal and philosophical assumptions (29). Using this method, the present study intended to reveal the meaning of spiritual awakening in relation to recovery and the function of the 12-step

program through the stories told by the NA members.

Participants

The participants of this study were the NA members in Kerman who had gone through the 12-step program at least once and had experienced recovery. Interviews started in December 2018 and lasted until September 2019. Moreover, the samples were collected using the purposive maximum variation sampling method to attain in-depth data, and this was done until data saturation was achieved (28). After the ninth interview, no new categories emerged. The researchers conducted two more interviews to ensure data saturation. The study participants were eleven male Muslims, two of whom were Baloch and the rest were Fars. The mean age of the participants was 40.9 and the mean duration of drug use and abstinence were 18.6 and 5.5 years, respectively.

Data collection

Eleven in-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The interviews were conducted at the participants' desired time and location (their workplace or home or the researcher's workplace). The participants were asked to narrate their experiences of the 12-step program and spiritual awakening. The main questions included, "what does spiritual awakening mean to you", "How did each step help you to reach spiritual awakening?", "What stable changes have occurred in you due to spiritual awakening?", "What experiences in the program played the most important role in your recovery?", "What effect have the steps had on your relationship with God?", "How has your relationship with others changed?", "How is your relationship with nature?", and "What has changed in the way you dealt with life challenges?" Based on the answers provided by the participants, some probing questions such as "Could you please explain more about ...?" or "can you give an example?" were asked to reach a deeper understanding of their experiences. During the interviews, the researchers tried to create balance between listening to the participants' experiences and focusing the interview on the study subject. With the consent of the participants, interviews were recorded using a digital recorder. Interviews lasted 90 to 105 minutes. After each interview, the recording was transcribed verbatim. Afterward, the transcriptions were analyzed by the researchers.

MAXQDA 2018 software was used to encode and analyze the data.

Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed using the hermeneutic phenomenology introduced by Lindseth and Norberg (27). Analysis and interpretation included a dialectical movement between understanding the whole or parts of the texts (hermeneutic circle) and understanding and explanation. The narrations were transcribed and interpreted in three steps including naïve understanding, structural analysis, and comprehensive understanding. In the first step, interviews were read multiple times by the researchers with an open mind to reach a basic understanding of the meaning of spiritual awakening. Furthermore, the researchers tried to specify a direction for structural analysis. In the second step, the connections and patterns in the texts were explored and then compared with the naïve understanding for validation by dividing them into units of meaning, condensing the units, and creating themes and subthemes. In the third step, each text was reread as a whole, and a comprehensive understanding was reached while taking into account the naïve understanding, structural analysis, and the relevant literature.

Trustworthiness

Numerous qualitative studies use Guba and Lincoln's (1985) procedures to assess the quality of their findings and data. These criteria include credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (30). Therefore, in order to check the data credibility, the researcher maintained a good relationship with the participants for a long period (one year) in order to collect and analyze data. Moreover, the researcher tried to use diverse samples to achieve more in-depth data. After analyzing each interview, the participants were contacted again (member-checking) to clarify any ambiguity and to verify the extracted ideas if required, and necessary changes were made. Continuous comparison of data and reviewing codes by the research team were performed to improve the credibility. In order to improve the dependability, peer checking was done to check the possible similarity between the peer's understanding and that of the researcher and to detect contradictions. Besides, to ensure the confirmability and efficiency of the data analysis and decision-making processes, the researcher benefited from expert opinions and guidance.

Furthermore, every step of the study, especially data analysis, was recorded in detail. To assess the transferability, research findings were given to some samples other than but similar to the study samples, and they were asked to give their opinions and a conceptual generalization was achieved based on the similarities.

Ethical considerations

Data were collected after obtaining the permission from the ethics committee of Kerman University of Medical Sciences (ethics code: IR.KMU.REC.1397.347), explaining the study aims to research units, and receiving informed consent (for recording the voice and publishing the data) from the participants who met the inclusion criteria. Moreover, the participants were informed about the privacy of information, anonymity of all documents in the research, and permission to withdraw at any time.

Results

Naïve understanding

The message conveyed by the texts of the interviews was that spiritual awakening means being aware of the presence of a higher power. Being accepted and receiving emotional support from peers freed participants from the unbearable suffering of loneliness. Expressing individual experiences in the meetings provided them with an opportunity to see themselves in the mirror of their peers. This process led them to accept their own weaknesses and deficiencies. Participants looked at their feelings, mistakes, and shortages and found a realistic image of themselves. Gaining appropriate self-knowledge and finding the true-self created peace among participants. Their lives became purposeful and meaningful. They accepted the present moment and understood that nothing is alone and there is no separation in the world. This sense of unity caused them to have unconditional love. Being connected to God, others, and nature was one of the outcomes of the unconditional love.

Structural analysis

The main theme extracted in this stage was opening the doors of perception to a higher reality. This theme consists of seven subthemes including (1) Being accepted and embraced by fellow pain sufferers through their very presence, (2) Being connected to a higher power and freedom from self-centeredness, (3) Self-reorganization

and acceptance through self-reflective practice, (4) Taking responsibility by stopping making excuses and starting making changes, (5) Cultivating a culture of continuous care, (6) Connecting with the true self and spreading unconditional love, and (7) Living in the flow of life and learning from nature.

Being accepted and embraced by fellow pain sufferers through their very presence

According to the Participants' experiences, they entered the fellowship with a strong feeling of helplessness and desperation. They considered themselves excluded from home and society. However, in the fellowship, they were accepted as human beings irrespective of religion, reputation, or wealth without any sense of guilt. Participants experienced that people with collective pain were present and this pain has been treated with their own cooperation and assistance.

"They hug each other from the very first day. I found it was a good place, a place where everybody welcomes, accepts, and respects you. Unfortunately, addicted people are usually kind of rejected from the society but they accept you there. When you see those, who could be cleansed with the help of each other, this gives you hope" (Participant 6)

The participants' experiences revealed that the fellowship was full of sense of presence. The sense of presence separates their minds from thoughts related to the past and future and eliminates the fears and anxieties resulting from these thoughts. In the moments of presence and listening, they have lost their selves and have been completely dissolved in the higher power.

"When you become silent in the meeting, you start to receive messages from God. There is no self, no thoughts, and no regrets or worrying about the past and the future" (Participant 11).

Being connected to a higher power and freedom from self-centeredness

The texts of the interviews showed that the participants found that the only way to confront addiction was to join God and gain strength from that infinite and indescribable power. The participants accepted surrender to the higher power as the basic principle of the fellowship.

"Addiction is so strong and no one can do anything for the addict. You must get help from a higher

power, so that you can stay clean for many years... so many years..." (Participant 9).

According to the Participants' experiences, being aware of the presence of a higher power has reduced their arrogance and selfishness. By attending the fellowship and knowing the existence of a great divine power, one becomes aware of the absurdity and illusory nature of the individual's possessions and knowledge and leaves them for the majesty of the Lord.

"They told me to sit and stay silent, listen to this moment, not use what you know, and suppose you don't know anything. I accepted. Because the most important thing that causes any kind of problem for us is selfishness" (Participant 7).

Self-reorganization and acceptance through self-reflective practice

The texts of the interviews showed that expressing individual experiences and sharing them provided the participants with an opportunity to clearly see themselves and their personal problems in the mirror of their peers. Being reflected in the mirror of others and seeing their success in coping with addiction led the participants to accept their real situation.

"You feel that this is the right environment for you to start talking. I was the first to express my feelings that we have collective pain and how good this saying is that "The collective pain will never dissolve separately". It was here that the desire and motive for stepping in this path was formed in me" (Participant 8).

After accepting their addiction, they also accepted their own weaknesses and deficiencies. Through taking a moral inventory and seeing their fears, anger, and pain, they have become aware of the patterns of the past. They honestly found a realistic image of themselves and became aware of their real personality.

"I searched, found, and listed a lot of issues that I had not seen by myself at all. I looked at myself without a mask and began to discover the truth inside me" (Participant 2).

Taking responsibility by stopping making excuses and starting making changes

The participants were aware of their responsibility for personal weaknesses and found that the only

people able to change them were themselves. Therefore, without any expectations from others, they tried to eliminate the shortcomings.

"In the fellowship, I became familiar with the key to change my life: everything starts from myself. I myself am the creator of my fate, so I shouldn't put the ball in the other's court" (Participant 2).

By accepting personal responsibilities, they reviewed the damage they caused to their family and others. After becoming aware of the damages and the resulting consequences, they went to the people they had hurt and asked for forgiveness. Redemption and freedom from tensions resulting from compensation for losses were found abundantly in the participants' experiences.

"I tried to soothe my dad. I apologized for previous behaviors. He said, 'You'll never change or repent'. I was embarrassed. I was nervous at first. My friends said 'He may become angry, he may slap you, everything may happen' ... but I waited until he finished his speech, then he became calmer and sympathized with me; he accepted me ..." (Participant 1)

Cultivating a culture of continuous care

The participants found that recovery is a process to which there is no end. By writing daily inventory, their behavior and thoughts were evaluated continuously in order not to fall back into the trap of old patterns of addiction.

"I always do a checkup; that is to say, step ten is not over, it's always there. This step checks us daily. It asks a question at night and we answer. If the answers are bad, you get upset. You should check and see what the problem is" (Participant 1).

Connecting with the true self and spreading unconditional love

The participants stated that attending the fellowship made them realize their true self. In the light of the presence and its peace, the compulsion to behave in a particular way, show-off, and unnecessary musts disappeared. Being the true self and expressing feelings as they are gave the participants pleasure and joy and made it possible for them to experience calmness in a deep and real way.

"The best thing that can happen to any person is remaining calm in the worst moments of life. I used

to have a lot of stress, but I did not show it; now, if I have stress, I'll express it; if I feel like laughing, I'll laugh; and if I feel like crying, I'll cry. I didn't use to be like that, I had a mask" (Participant 5).

According to the participants' experiences, intimacy and love created spirituality and purity in interpersonal relationships. The pleasure of the feeling of love and purity caused them to share it with others and to consider it as their most important duty.

"Through serving and unconditional love in the fellowship, I found that we are the separated parts of a puzzle, and in spite of being separated, when we connect to each other, we create a single, meaningful, and beautiful unity" (Participant 8).

Living in the flow of life and learning from nature

Accepting the reality of the present moment and flowing in the river of life was another unique experience mentioned by participants.

"The best meditation for me is being with God, living every moment, facing the challenges of life, flowing in the river, and going where the river of life is supposed to take you" (Participant 4).

The participants also stated that being present in nature and meditating there dissolved their anxiety and gave them significant energy. They experienced learning from the resistance and sustainability of trees in winter and hard conditions.

"The river which passes through the mountains seems to take my pain and sadness away; trees, in spite of hibernation, do their best to survive till spring to become glorious again" (Participant 10).

Comprehensive understanding

Spiritual awakening has been interpreted as a return to a universal sea of consciousness. The participants taking part in the NA meetings were able to achieve individual awareness, much like lonely rivers reuniting with an ocean of consciousness – a genuine presence which allowed them to actualize and become who they are.

The ocean knows that all the evanescent waves, thoughts, and suffering are mere ripples made by the dance of the waves. They became one and united with others, nature, and the entire human experience, interwoven by the strands of consciousness, which weaves them all into a unified

whole. This was a journey they could take by merely surrendering to the waves.

Discussion

To the Narcotics Anonymous (NA) participants, spiritual awakening meant a return to the universal ocean of consciousness. As Foster (2006) puts it, we are all ripples in the vast ocean of life. We are all expressions of unified consciousness. We are unique and never-repeated ripples in the same consciousness, no matter how different we appear to be—the apparent diversity and distance between us being the ultimate source of suffering. Awakening is in fact, a return to the lost unity – the belief that there is no “I” in the face of universal oneness (31). Ford writes, “Most of us set out on the path to personal growth because at some point the burden of our pain becomes too much to bear.” (32). As a spiritual phenomenon, the unbearable suffering resulting from addiction which is recognizable by ensuing despair and helplessness is a key factor in the initiation of growth (33).

In this study, according to the participants' statements, the unbearable suffering of loneliness has forced them to search for external help and support to overcome it. Previous studies confirm this finding (20, 34-36). The social resources in NA meetings help the members to overcome their feelings of social alienation and loneliness by enhancing the sense of belonging and participation leading to the growth and betterment of their personalities (37, 38). The participants of the study declared that being in the present time, participating and active listening in the meetings, and listening to the fellow sufferers have inspired them with a sense of hope for improvement. The participants in the study by Delucia et al. also emphasized regular participation in the meetings, keeping an open mind, following the recommendations, and gaining hope from sharing experiences (20). Comprehensive studies on the 12-step program introduce conversation and telling life stories as determining factors in the program success (35). Based on the findings of this study, participants' faith and trust gradually increased after surrendering to a higher power and accepting their illness. In this regard, the studies by Delucia and Green also showed that accepting powerlessness, ignoring personal willpower, and surrendering to a higher power are the most important factors in recovery from addiction (20, 35).

Participants of the present study evaluated themselves by writing a moral inventory and stating whatever fueled their anger, pain, and suffering and tried to find their true self. They also accepted the responsibility of their past and present actions. Dossett believed addiction is a sign of deep sorrow and unrest, and anyone who is in search of long-term cleanness should alleviate their basic emotional issues. Fear, sadness, guilt, and shame are stimulants of addictive behaviors and must be identified through the moral inventory and be replaced with continuous commitment to change, making amends for previous harms, and preventing any further harm (39). Participants in the study by Delucia et al. also pointed to responsibility, persistence, commitment to change, and acceptance of feelings (20).

In later stages of improvement, participants stated that they were in conscious connection with their thoughts, spirit, feelings, and behavior through composing a daily inventory. In fact, they found the necessary strength to act upon God's will through constant care, prayers, and meditation. Participants in the study by Zia Hashemi also pointed to ongoing self-evaluation and self-monitoring, self-knowledge, and self-improvement based on social moral principles (36). Dossett stated that the key to the 12-step program is having a daily program including commitment to abstinence, altruism, prayers, and meditation (39).

According to the participants' statements, gaining proper self-knowledge and accepting the existential truth created peace among them, the people they know, and God. It seems that for these people, spiritual awakening results from increasing knowledge and awareness. This is why they have realized that nothing is alone and separated in this world and have found eternal unity with their fellow men in spite of the existing divisions and multiplicity. Their lives have become meaningful today. In his study, Zia Hashemi emphasized the principle of unity in NA groups. Based on this unity, all members work together for improvement as a collective spirit (36). In this regard, a similar study reported improving meaning and purpose in life through serving others (40).

One of the themes experienced by the participants in the present study was Living in the flow of life and learning from nature that was not reported in any of the previous studies reviewed by the researchers. The participants stated that nature has

generously given them its beauty and blessings. Being present in nature, friendship with it as a living creature, and learning from its rules were unique items experienced by the participants of the present study.

Conclusion

The present study provided valuable knowledge regarding spiritual awakening for Narcotics Anonymous (NA) members and other people in the society. It seems that spiritual awakening is a continuous flow of increasing awareness and a moving towards personal reformation. Conducting qualitative studies and reflecting on previous experiences not only helps the study participants but also provides a source of knowledge for other addicts and the general public. This empirical knowledge can also be a guide to healthcare

providers to implement preventive measures and medical interventions related to substance abuse. Therefore, it seems that more interaction between medical and healthcare team members and 12-step fellowships can be one of the keys to solving the intricate problem of treating addiction.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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