

Original Article



Spiritual Self-care: A Qualitative Study of Existential Spirituality in People with Cancer in Iran

Maryam Sheikhpourkhani^{1*}, Abbas Abbaszadeh²

¹Medicine and Religious Research Center, Kerman University of Medical Sciences, Kerman, Iran

²Medical Ethics and Law Research Center, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

*Corresponding Author: Maryam Sheikhpourkhani, Email: m.sheikhpourkhani@gmail.com

Abstract

Background: Spiritual self-care (SSC) is a multidimensional construct encompassing spirituality-based activities to promote health. It is an up-to-date approach that individuals engage in to promote ongoing personal development and well-being in health and illness. Existential spirituality, which is a key aspect of the broader concept of SSC, pertains to the way individuals find meaning and purpose in their lives, particularly during an existential crisis when a previously held worldview loses its legitimacy. In the context of cancer management, understanding the dimensions of SSC is crucial for achieving holistic health and well-being, as it addresses the spiritual and existential needs of individuals facing illness and suffering.

Methods: This qualitative study aimed to explore health-promoting SSC activities among people with cancer in Iran. The study was conducted using the conventional content analysis approach guided by White's Theory of Spirituality and Spiritual Self-Care (WTSSSC). Participants were 12 people with cancer registered with Yas Charity Support Association for Cancer Patients in Kerman, who were selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the participants. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using Graneheim and Lundman's qualitative content analysis.

Results: The qualitative analysis of the experiences of individuals with cancer engaging in health-promoting SSC activities revealed four themes (each with subthemes) including Representation of Artistic-Aesthetic Activities (Harmonizing with Nature and Music), Semantic Recovery (Semantic Recovery of Relationships and Embracing Novel Experiences), Hope Orientation (Promoting Hope), and Embodied Movement Mindfulness (Embodied Mindfulness).

Conclusion: This study provides valuable insights into the dimensions of SCC activities in people with cancer, highlighting the importance of integrating these activities with conventional cancer treatments to promote health and well-being. Successful implementation of this holistic approach requires active support from healthcare providers.

Keywords: Spiritual self-care, Existential spirituality, Cancer, Qualitative research, Conventional content analysis, Iran

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Introduction

The concept of self-care is a multidimensional construct (1) that has been widely embraced by nurses since the introduction of Orem's self-care theory in 1959 (2). Nurses' traditional concern with human spirituality (3) has led them to consider self-care as a spiritual activity and spirituality as an important component of self-care (4).

The inseparability of spirituality from self-care (5) has led to the development of the most significant and modern dimension of self-care, known as spiritual self-care (SSC) (6). SSC encompasses a set of spirituality-based activities proposed in White's Theory of Spirituality and Spiritual Self-Care (WTSSSC) aimed at promoting health. These activities are derived from selected aspects of Orem's Self-Care Deficit Nursing Theory (SCDNT) (2).

The WTSSSC model offers a new vision on spirituality

by separating spiritual beliefs from spiritual activities, including SSC. The most important components of SSC activities include personal SSC, spiritual, physical spiritual, and interpersonal spiritual practices such as listening to inspirational music, meditation, yoga, attending religious services, reading sacred or inspirational texts, walking, and enjoying nature (2).

Most studies on SSC have considered following a religious doctrine as a key factor for health promotion. In Iran, SSC activities for stroke survivors, including worship, prayer, resort, and trust, as well as religious beliefs such as divine blessing and divine providence, are key factors for reconciliation with the disease and motivation to perform better self-care to recover and manage the disease (7).

Some studies on SSC have emphasized the importance of a combination of religious and non-religious activities



in promoting health. SSC activities performed by Iranians include religious care (religion) and (non-religious) care (respecting rights and dignity, commitment to humanitarian and ethical behavior, and finding meaning and purpose in life) (8). SSC activities performed by Iranian adolescents include self-control, reliance on God, personal activities, proximity to God, and performing religious duties. These activities fill adolescents' free time, bring closeness and intimacy with God, help them endure hardships and problems, improve their mental health, and contribute to preventing high-risk behaviors in adolescents (9).

Despite the growing body of research on health-promoting SSC activities, there remains a knowledge gap in this area. Studies have indicated that these activities can have a positive impact on various health conditions, such as controlling blood pressure (10), reducing aggression (11), and addressing the effects of sexual abuse in women infected with HIV (5). Furthermore, they have been associated with improved life expectancy and quality of life in patients with coronary artery disease (6), enhanced wound acceptance, and accelerated diabetic wound healing (12), as well as promoting well-being, recovery, and quality of life in stroke sufferers (13). Additionally, SSC activities have been linked to improved self-efficacy in teenagers with thalassemia (14), and have shown potential in reducing stress and depression in patients (13).

People with chronic diseases, including cancer, often engage in SSC activities to help them adapt to their conditions and manage disease symptoms (13). The lack of SSC activities in these individuals can lead to chronic fatigue, which adversely affects their health and well-being (15). Cancer, as a chronic disease, often prompts patients to seek purpose and meaning in life, leading to a spiritual crisis and an increased necessity for managing the disease based on spirituality. This aspect of cancer care underscores the importance of addressing the spiritual and existential needs of patients as part of a comprehensive approach to cancer management (8).

Cancer incidence rates are on the rise globally, including in Iran, the country classified as an intermediate-risk area on the global map of cancer. This trend is expected to continue until 2025 (16), likely due to changes in lifestyle and increasing exposure to risk factors for cancer. Iranians, predominantly Muslims with religious (Islamic) orientations, demonstrate a strong inclination to engage in SSC activities, including religious and non-religious methods (8). This reflects a significant desire to complement conventional cancer treatments with a holistic approach that extends beyond religious practices. While religious (Islamic) methods are prominent, the role of non-religious activities is also noteworthy. This demonstrates that taking part in SSC activities has a positive impact on patients' health. It emphasizes the

importance of these activities in managing diseases and highlights the potential of holistic approaches in cancer care, as well as their integration with treatment, indicating a need for further research in this area.

Accordingly, the current research was conducted to explore health-promoting SSC activities among people with cancer in Iran, using the conventional content analysis approach guided by WTSSSC.

Methods

Research design

This study was conducted using a conventional content analysis approach guided by WTSSSC to address the question, "What SSC activities promote health among people with cancer in Iran?" The study was carried out from December to February 2013 on 12 individuals with various types of cancer who were registered with the Yas Charity Support Association in Kerman. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, and the inclusion criteria were fluency in Persian, absence of inpatient or outpatient mental illness history, and confirmation of cancer diagnosis by an oncology specialist and oncology surgeon, as documented in the patient's files.

Data collection

In this qualitative study, data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the participants. The interviews typically lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour, with an average duration of approximately 30 minutes. The interviewers introduced themselves and asked open-ended questions about SSC and its impact. Examples of the questions included "How spiritually do you care for yourself?", "What are your SSC activities?", "What are the manifestations of doing SSC activities for you?", "How does spirituality affect your care?", and "What do you think about SSC activities?" The direction of the interview was determined by the participants' responses, and probing questions were asked as necessary (e.g., "Do you have something to say?" and "Can you give an example?"). The interviews ended when both the interviewer and participants indicated that there were no further comments.

Data analysis

In this study, interviews with 12 individuals with cancer were recorded digitally, transcribed verbatim, and typed into Microsoft Word. Data were analyzed using MAXQDA10 software and the qualitative content analysis approach proposed by Graneheim and Lundman. Meaningful sections were identified and coded, and then a list of the related codes and significant statements was prepared. Following constant comparison, reduction, and refinement, the extracted codes were merged into main themes and subthemes (17).

Trustworthiness

In this qualitative study, the trustworthiness of the findings was meticulously assessed using the criteria recommended by Guba and Lincoln (18). Data credibility was ensured through member checking, external audits, and prolonged engagement with the participants, subject matter, and data. Confirmability was achieved by presenting participants' quotes and utilizing peer debriefing. To enhance data dependability, interviews were transcribed promptly and reviewed through peer checking. Furthermore, to improve the transferability of the findings, participants were chosen with maximum variation. Finally, providing recommendations for future research, clinical implications, and study limitations also enhanced transferability. This comprehensive approach strengthens the reliability and validity of the study's findings, ensuring that they accurately reflect the experiences and perspectives of the participants.

Ethical considerations

In this qualitative study, the participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality of their data and information. They were also allowed to withdraw from the study at any time without facing negative consequences or impact on their treatment. The researchers committed to securely storing the participants' identifiable documents and audio recordings for two years after the end of the study. Before conducting the interviews, the participants were informed about the study's aims and methods through telephone calls or face-to-face meetings. They agreed to the details of the interview process. The research received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Kerman University of Medical Sciences, with the ethics code IR.KMU.REC.1402.15. It also obtained a legal permit from the Kerman Charity Support Association to conduct interviews with people with cancer. All participants signed an informed consent form before taking part in the interviews.

Results

The study participants included 12 male and female individuals with cancer registered with the Yas Charity Support Association for Cancer Patients in Kerman, who were selected through purposive sampling. The participants represented different types and stages of cancer (I- IV), with the majority undergoing treatment, while others were experiencing recovery or treatment failure. The mean age of the participants was 48.8 years, their educational levels ranged from high school diploma to Ph.D., and all were Muslim and Shiite (Table 1).

From the analysis of SSC experiences of individuals with cancer, a set of spirituality-based health- and well-being-promoting SSC activities emerged. These activities could complement conventional cancer treatments and contribute to a more holistic approach to cancer

management. The study identified the following themes and subthemes (Table 2).

Representation of artistic-aesthetic activities

The participants in the study suggested that engaging in artistic and aesthetic activities, such as harmonizing with nature, contributed to finding meaning in their lives and promoting health.

One participant enthusiastically stated, "*Nature gives meaning to my life. I experience a natural and healthy life in the heart of nature*" (Participant 1).

Another participant likened the silence of nature to a relaxing piece of music, saying, "*I could not tolerate any sound other than soothing music and the sounds and silence of nature. Even the silence of the night was a promise of health for me*" (Participant 4).

Participants also reported listening to music, especially nature sounds and spirituality-based relaxing music, played a role in promoting their health. One participant interpreted the sound of nature as the voice of health, stating, "*The sounds of the waterfall and the birds have a different meaning for me. It doesn't matter if it is the crow's caw or the nightingale's song*".

Semantic recovery

The participants in the study made a spiritual effort to promote health by linking new meanings with previous meanings, resulting in a process of semantic recovery. They asserted that they could restore meaningful relationships based on priority, love, help, forgiveness, and peace with themselves and others. These experiences aligned with broader themes of personal growth, including social reconnection, supportive relationships, and reconnection with self and the world.

One participant emphasized the significance of maintaining and restoring relationships, stating, "*As soon as I returned to my ex-wife and ended my toxic relationships, prioritizing my healthy relationships, I felt healthy*" (Participant 1).

Another participant attributed her health recovery to being part of a network of meaningful relationships, expressing, "*I have established a network of people who love me and I love them, and I have established my relationships with them*" (Participant 1).

Furthermore, the participants highlighted the role of health-promoting spirituality-based activities in embracing novel experiences. For instance, a 40-year-old participant stated, "*After learning Pateh embroidery (A type of Kermani needlework), I started attending dancing classes. If I'm going to live, why not live purposefully and healthily?*" (Participant 9).

Hopeful orientation

The participants expressed the significance of hope as a spiritual experience that gave meaning to their lives and

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Number	Gender	Age (y)	Education	Type of cancer	Stage of disease	Type of treatment
1	Female	49	Ph.D.	Breast	III	Recovered
2	Female	35	Associate degree	Breast	IV	Undergoing radiotherapy
3	Male	65	High school diploma	Prostate	III	Prostatectomy
4	Male	52	Bachelor's degree	Prostate	III	Undergoing chemotherapy
5	Female	38	High school diploma	Colon	III	Partial colectomy
6	Male	30	High school diploma	Leukemia	III	Undergoing chemotherapy
7	Female	37	Associate degree	Multiple myeloma	End Stage	Treatment failure
8	Male	38	Master's degree	Pancreas	I	Undergoing chemotherapy
9	Female	32	Bachelor's degree	Thyroid	II	Undergoing radiotherapy
10	Female	74	High school diploma	Renal	III	Right nephrectomy
11	Male	70	High school diploma	Gastric	III	Partial gastrectomy
12	Female	66	Master's degree	Esophagus	III	Undergoing chemotherapy

Table 2. Spiritual self-care activities

Themes	Subthemes
Representation of artistic-aesthetic activities	Harmonizing with nature
	Harmonizing with music
Semantic recovery	Semantic recovery of relationships
	Embracing novel experiences
Hopeful orientation	Promoting hope
Embodied movement mindfulness	Embodied mindfulness

had a positive impact on their health.

They conveyed this sense of hope, stating: *“I hope for treatment with the help of God. With the continuation of treatment and health, I hope for life and the future”* (Participant 11).

Embodied movement mindfulness

The participants emphasized the importance of combining spiritual experiences with physical activity as a vital part of their health promotion routines. They reported that *engaging in spirituality-based physical activities, such as walking, promoted a sense of connection with the earth and a sense of wholeness, which contributed to their overall well-being* (Participant 2).

One participant saw yoga as a predominantly spiritual practice rather than a physical one, expressing that *“yoga contributes to health and well-being.”* (Participant 7) Another participant, who started doing yoga after being diagnosed with cancer, stated that *“yoga is motivating, guiding, and calming, resulting in enhanced health and well-being”* (Participant 1).

The participants talked assertively about the health-oriented role of spirituality-based physical activities (mainly walking): *“After being admitted to the hospital, I felt healthy by walking, experiencing a sense of connection with the earth and a sense of wholeness as if the fragments of my being were patched together by connecting to the ground. This feeling is similar to the feeling of putting my*

forehead on the ground for prostration” (Participant 12).

Discussion

This study used the conventional content analysis approach guided by WTSSSC to investigate SSC activities performed by individuals with cancer in Iran. The results confirmed that “representation of artistic-aesthetic activities” (“harmonizing with nature” and “harmonizing with music”), “semantic recovery” (“semantic recovery of relationships” and “embracing novel experiences”), “hopeful orientation” (promoting hope), and “embodied movement mindfulness” (embodied mindfulness) play a crucial role in improving the health of patients with cancer in Iran and can be integrated with conventional cancer treatments.

The exposure to the threat of death renders discussions about death taboo among individuals with cancer. However, engaging in SSC activities based on the representation of artistic and aesthetic activities, such as harmonizing with nature and music, can help break this taboo. A study reported that listening to relaxing music and the sounds of nature and participating in music classes serve as important SSC activities for Iranian adolescents (9). Moreover, enjoying nature and listening to inspiring music have been identified as beneficial SSC activities for people with heart failure (2). White’s concept of semantic and self-care activities highlights the importance of engaging in a variety of activities to promote health including taking time for oneself, being in peace and harmony, expressing love toward others, forgiving oneself and others, helping others, joining religious groups, consulting with spiritual advisors, repairing broken relationships, giving gifts to those in need, maintaining friendships, being with family, having meaningful conversations with others, receiving love from others, and being with friends. These activities may promote a sense of connection with others, fostering a deeper understanding of oneself and one’s relationships

with others (3). Dennett associated secular religion with experiences of peace that exist independently of traditional religious beliefs, suggesting that people may find peace and well-being through secular spiritual practices, apart from conventional religious frameworks (19)

The experience of confronting a life-threatening illness, such as cancer, can profoundly impact an individual's sense of meaning and purpose. The threat of mortality can lead to a search for semantic recovery, as individuals strive to find new meaning and understanding in their lives. This search for semantic recovery often involves engaging in activities that foster semantic recovery of relationships, which focuses on improving one's relationships with oneself and others, and embracing novel experiences, which can ultimately contribute to an individual's overall health and well-being. In this regard, a study reported that young women with cancer in Mizo, India, sought new activities during the COVID-19 pandemic as a means to gain new experiences (18). Further research has indicated that Iranian teenagers, as part of their activities, prioritize building meaningful relationships, showing respect for others, and avoiding friendships with dishonest individuals (9). Furthermore, forming friendships has been shown to enhance the well-being of adolescents with thalassemia (14)

The concept of hopeful orientation refers to having a positive and motivated mindset that results in engaging in hopeful behaviors, leading to steady progress toward goals and promoting hope and psychological well-being (20). Literature highlights the role of SSC activities in promoting hope in life (21). These activities can improve life expectancy and quality of life in patients with coronary artery disease (6) and hope for the future in patients with heart failure (2).

Embodied movement mindfulness, integrates movement consciousness with mindfulness practices. On the other hand, embodied mindfulness focuses on integrating mindfulness with the body, a concept more directly related to tangible experiences such as yoga and walking. Therefore, both concepts can be associated with SSC through the promotion of self-awareness and self-care (22,23).

Participants engaged in SSC activities like walking and yoga, to improve their overall health, believing it could help them heal physically and spiritually. This suggests that changes in physical self-care can also impact other areas, including the spiritual aspect (20). Therefore, both walking and yoga act as embodied mindfulness that bring about positive changes in individuals (2). Research indicates that by engaging in SSC activities such as sports and yoga, and participating in light sports activities, Iranian adolescents with thalassemia could enhance their well-being (14).

Limitations

The current study focused exclusively on SSC activities

that promote the health of individuals with cancer in Iran.

Conclusion

This study investigated the significance of various dimensions of SSC activities among individuals with cancer, emphasizing the importance of integrating these activities with conventional cancer treatments to enhance health and well-being. The active support of healthcare providers is crucial in addressing the spiritual and existential needs of patients, particularly in the context of illness and suffering. The findings underscored the value of a holistic approach that combines SSC with medical interventions, ultimately contributing to comprehensive patient care and improved outcomes. The integration of SSC into cancer management is a vital aspect of nursing practice, recognizing the significance of addressing the spiritual and existential dimensions of health to provide personalized and effective care to individuals with cancer. Future research could explore the impact of SSC activities on health and well-being in the context of cancer treatment through quantitative analysis. Besides, future studies are recommended to qualitatively analyze SSC experiences in patients with other diseases and in different cultural contexts.

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Authors' Contribution

Conceptualization: Maryam Sheikhpourkhani.

Data curation: Maryam Sheikhpourkhani.

Formal analysis: Maryam Sheikhpourkhani.

Methodology: Maryam Sheikhpourkhani

Project administration: Maryam Sheikhpourkhani.

Resources: Maryam Sheikhpourkhani.

Software: Maryam Sheikhpourkhani.

Validation: Maryam Sheikhpourkhani, Abbas Abbaszadeh.

Visualization: Maryam Sheikhpourkhani, Abbas Abbaszadeh.

Writing-original draft: Maryam Sheikhpourkhani.

Writing-review & editing: Maryam Sheikhpourkhani, Abbas Abbaszadeh.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Kerman University of Medical Sciences with the ethics code IR.KMU.REC.1402.15. The study's participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation in the research.

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