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Self-Transcendence in Stem Cell Transplantation Recipients: A Phenomenologic Inquiry

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Patients who undergo stem cell transplantation (SCT) face multiple challenges that affect major aspects of their lives. They have been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness such as leukemia or lymphoma and, although transplantation is a potential cure for many of the underlying diseases, the process is complex and arduous. In the acute phase, most patients experience painful side effects from high doses of chemotherapy and radiation and also are at risk for many types of infection. Although survival rates after transplantation have improved since the 1980s, complications are a significant cause of mortality. Beyond the acute phase, the recurrence of disease is a major factor contributing to mortality (Keller, 2007; Rimkus, 2009). Depression and psychological distress, strain in family and social relationships, and financial distress are not uncommon (Cooke, Gemmill, Kravits, & Grant, 2009; Kettmann & Altmaier, 2008; McQuellen et al., 1998; Syrjala et al., 2004).

Many patients are not only resilient and creative in managing the challenges, but grow personally during the process. That observation by the author served as the foundation for this research study, the purpose of which was to understand the meaning of self-transcendence for patients who have undergone SCT.

Self-transcendence has been identified as a valuable inner resource. The human capacity to be directed beyond the self is one way to find meaning in adverse circumstances and, thereby, to reduce the suffering that may accompany such circumstances (Block, 2001; Casel, 1982; Frankl, 1959, 1978; Reed, 1991b; Teixeira, 2008).

Building on works from transpersonal psychology (Frankl, 1959, 1978; Jung, 1933, 1971) and lifespan development theory (Erikson, 1950), a mid-range theory of self-transcendence was formulated by Reed (1983, 1986, 1991a, 1991b, 1996). She reconceptualized the developmental resource of self-transcendence as a nonlinear (rather than a linear) concept. Therefore, self-transcendence can be triggered in any situation in which

Purpose/Objectives: To understand the meaning of self-transcendence, or the ability to go beyond the self, for patients who have had a stem cell transplantation.

Research Approach: A phenomenologic investigation guided by the interpretive philosophy of Heidegger.

Setting: A cancer center in a major urban academic medical center.

Participants: 4 men and 4 women ages 45–63 who had received a stem cell transplantation in the previous year.

Methodologic Approach: Two or three unstructured, open-ended interviews were conducted with each participant. Data were extracted, analyzed, and interpreted according to the Colaizzi method.

Main Research Variables: Self-transcendence.

Findings: Self-transcendence emerged as a process that was triggered by the suffering the participants experienced as they lived through the physical effects of the treatment, faced death, drew strength from within themselves, and perceived a spiritually influenced turning point. The experience of a human connection lessened their feelings of vulnerability in the process. As the participants recovered, they described being transformed both physically and personally.

Conclusions: The findings from this study highlight the power inherent in patients to not only meet the challenges they face, but to grow from their experiences. The findings also highlight patients' deep need for a human connection and the power that nurses and other healthcare professionals have to provide that connection.

Interpretation: The caring connections established by healthcare professionals can ease the ability of patients to access the inner resource of self-transcendence and reduce their feelings of vulnerability.

a person feels vulnerable. Aging and life-threatening illness are two such situations. Former ways of thinking and being are transcended when they are not useful for coping with present circumstances. That orients an individual toward broadened life perspectives and purposes (Reed, 1986, 1989). Reed (2008) defined self-transcendence as the expansion of personal boundaries