

# Spirituality and Life-Threatening Illness: A Phenomenologic Study

Jeffrey A. Albaugh, MS, APRN-BC, CUCNS

**Purpose/Objectives:** To examine the lived experience of individuals when confronted with a life-threatening disease.

**Research Approach:** Qualitative, phenomenologic using Giorgi's approach.

**Setting:** Patients' homes in the Midwest.

**Participants:** Five women and two men, aged 44–74 years, who had a variety of diagnoses, including breast cancer, colorectal cancer, prostate cancer, pulmonary fibrosis, and myocardial infarction.

**Methodologic Approach:** Subjects were recruited through flyers posted at support groups and religious establishments and by word of mouth.

**Main Research Variables:** Willingness to volunteer to share their stories.

**Findings:** Participants described how their spirituality provided comfort throughout their journey, strength in facing the life-threatening illness, many blessings despite the hardship of the illness, and trust in a higher power to see them through the journey. All participants described a sense of meaning in their lives throughout their experience.

**Conclusions:** Spirituality greatly affected patients' journeys through a life-threatening illness and provided a sense of meaning despite the illness.

**Interpretation:** Nurses need to acknowledge patients' spirituality and, in turn, assist patients in meeting their spiritual needs. By understanding the study participants' experiences, nurses can better support their patients, provide time and space for spiritual practices, and honor patients' spiritual journeys.

The diagnosis of a life-threatening illness can be devastating. A life-threatening situation, however, may be the very situation that provides ultimate meaning in patients' lives. Frankl (1992) based his theory of logotherapy on the premise that life's purpose is in discovering meaning and that meaning can be found even in the worst circumstances. Despite being confronted with a life-threatening illness and potential suffering, some individuals have found purpose and meaning.

The recorded experiences of individuals and a review of literature suggest that spirituality is an important component in finding meaning with suffering. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin (1997) found purpose in describing and acknowledging how his faith helped him to find peace in his illness. He even went as far as to describe his illness as a "special gift" (Bernardin, 2001). Pastor Gerald Harper, Jr., was able to find meaning and purpose through biblical teachings of Christianity after he was diagnosed with lymphoma. His book, *Living With Dying: Finding Meaning in Chronic Illness* (Harper, 1992), provides an honest view of his journey toward death. Morrie Schwartz, a Jewish man who described himself as a "religious mutt" stealing his spirituality characteristics from Buddhism, Chris-

## Key Points . . .

- ▶ Spirituality plays an integral role in dealing with life-threatening illness.
- ▶ Nurses need to acknowledge and understand patients' spiritual beliefs to provide holistic care.
- ▶ Once nurses understand patients' spiritual beliefs, nurses can support patients in meeting spiritual needs, provide time and space for spiritual practices, and honor patients' spiritual journeys.

tianity, and Judaism, found meaning in teaching his final lessons as a professor to the world on the art of dying (Albom, 1997). Each of these individuals had strong spiritual beliefs. Spirituality has been identified in the literature as an important component for finding meaning and coping with illness (Duggleby, 2000; Hall, 1997; Highfield & Cason, 1983; Keefe et al., 2001; Livneh, 2000; O'Neill & Kenny, 1998; Schaefer, 1995; Strang & Strang, 2001; Thomas & Retsas, 1999). As some of these individuals have demonstrated, spirituality may help to illuminate meaning with life-threatening illness. If nurses are to understand the importance of spirituality in patients facing life-threatening illness, they must understand the essence of spiritual individuals' struggle to find meaning with life-threatening illness. The knowledge derived from this study will assist nurses in understanding the experience of spiritual patients in finding meaning with life-threatening illness.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experience of individuals diagnosed with a life-threatening disease. Gaining insight into these experiences can help nurses to facilitate their patients' spiritual journeys in dealing with their diagnoses. Using Giorgi's modification of the phenomenologic method, the responses from seven patients were analyzed to answer the question "What is the lived experience of

---

*Jeffrey A. Albaugh, MS, APRN-BC, CUCNS, is a clinical nurse specialist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, IL, and completed this research at North Park University in Chicago. (Submitted July 2002. Accepted for publication November 6, 2002.)*

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/03.ONF.593-598