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, Christianity, 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 experiences 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...