Ameliorating the Tension: Use of Forgiveness for Healing

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Purpose/Objectives: To generate a grounded substantive theory of the process of forgiveness in patients with cancer.

Design: Qualitative approach, grounded theory.

Settings: Inpatient hospice, cancer support groups, home care patients.

Sample: 25 adult patients with cancer between the ages of 35 and 88 (X = 62.4 years): 13 men and 12 women receiving active, palliative, or terminal treatment.

Methods: Using grounded theory methodology, open-ended interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using constant comparative analysis and expert and participant validation.

Main Research Variable: Forgiveness as reflected in participants’ past and current experiences.

Findings: Participants described hurtful events that initially caused severe negative emotional responses. Participants also described attempts to focus on living out priority values prompted by their cancer diagnosis. An escalating tension ensued between maintaining negative emotions and acting on personal values. Forgiveness was used to relieve this tension. Using several methods to gain perspective allowed resolving these negative emotions and living out priority values to various degrees.

Conclusions: A cancer diagnosis promotes the rethinking of life priorities regardless of the stage of disease. For these participants, forgiveness was used to help clarify personal values and to help eliminate negative emotions from an inflicted hurt.

Implications for Nursing Practice: Nurses can facilitate the healing process by helping patients to identify and clarify priority values, recognizing appropriate definitions of forgiveness, using active listening or referral to help patients analyze their situations, encouraging active approaches to forgiving, and encouraging perseverance in the process.

Key Points . . .

➤ A cancer diagnosis often promotes reprioritizing values that involve forgiveness issues.
➤ Tension often results between harboring anger or bitterness and wanting to achieve reprioritized goals.
➤ Patients may use forgiveness to help them resolve this tension.
➤ Oncology nurses, because of their unique knowledge of the impact of a cancer diagnosis, can be pivotal in assisting the patient’s movement through the forgiveness process.

Forgiveness has been an important topic in theological literature for centuries. Judeo-Christian and other religious traditions have valued and encouraged forgiveness to restore integrity to one’s self and to heal relationships with others and with God (Cunningham, 1985; Kemp, 1994; McCullough & Worthington, 1994a). However, the concept of forgiveness only recently has begun to receive attention in healthcare literature. General benefits of forgiveness are thought to include psychological and spiritual growth; reduction of negative emotions such as sadness, anger, or anxiety; ability to let go of the past and get on with life; cessation of hurtful behaviors; increase in ability to reestablish or build new relationships; and transcendence (Hope, 1987; McCullough & Worthington, 1994a; Pingleton, 1989; Rosenak & Harnden, 1992). According to a number of authors (Conrad, 1985; Doka, 1993; Kemp; Messenger & Roberts, 1994), forgiveness also may lead to a more accepting and peaceful death, help solidify a sense of meaning in life, help restore healthy relationships, and promote serenity in the dying process. In several studies that focused on forgiveness as a psychotherapeutic goal in healthy adults, a variety of positive responses were obtained, such as

Improving or maintaining the quality of life of patients with cancer is a significant goal for nursing. A frequently mentioned issue that may interfere with this goal, especially regarding terminally ill patients, is that of forgiveness (Clark, 1990; Conrad, 1985; Jacik, 1989; Kemp, 1994; Messenger & Roberts, 1994). Although several authors have considered a variety of benefits that occur to those who are able to forgive, numerous questions continue to arise regarding the actual process of forgiveness and potential interventions for those patients with concerns related to the need to forgive.