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

Barbara J. Williams, PhD, APN, RN

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 & Altmair, 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; Cassel, 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 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.