How Women With Advanced Cancer Pray: A Report From Two Focus Groups

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The relationship among religious and spiritual factors and well-being in patients with cancer has been well-established (Brady, Peterman, Fitchett, Mo, & Cella, 1999; Gall & Cornblat, 2002; Levine, Aviv, Yoo, Ewing, & Au, 2009; Prince-Paul, 2008); however, the mechanisms of the relationship are not yet understood. One particularly salient religious and spiritual factor is prayer. Prayer is a central practice across many religious traditions, but it also is practiced by those who consider themselves spiritual without following any specific faith tradition. McCullough and Larson (1999) reported that prayer also can be practiced by those who do not consider themselves religious or spiritual. According to a survey of more than 30,000 adults in the United States, prayer used specifically for one’s own health was the most common form of complementary and alternative medicine (Barnes, Powell-Griner, McFann, & Nahin, 2002).

Generally, prayer is thought of as a deliberative communication between a person and a supreme being, God, or something outside oneself (Levine et al., 2009; Meraviglia, 2002). However, prayer can also be an intimate and personal inward process. Ladd and Spilka (2002) suggested that prayer is best understood as making connections in three ways: inward prayers (self-examination), outward prayers (strengthening human-to-human connections), and upward prayers (focusing on the human-divine relationship). Prayer may either use words or be wordless, and requires concentration and focus to keep a detachment from other thoughts (McCullough & Larson, 1999).

Research shows that prayer is used at various points throughout the cancer experience. Based on a secondary analysis of qualitative interview data, Taylor, Outlaw, Bernardo, and Roy (1999) suggested that some types of prayer may enhance well-being, whereas other types may exacerbate distress. They identified several spiritual conflicts that arose when participants prayed about their cancer: unanswered prayer, hesitancy about petitionary prayer, conflicts around control, and questions about