

Oncology Nurses Spiritual Health Experience: A Qualitative Content Analysis

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A B S T R A C T

24

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Background: Spiritual health has been attended to in recent years as one of the factors affecting health consequences in human. According to review of literature, nurses' spiritual health can impact spiritual health care. Therefore, this qualitative study aimed to determine the spiritual health experiences of oncology nurses.

Methods: In this phenomenological qualitative research, 24 oncology nurses from 12 teaching hospitals affiliated to Tehran and Shahid Beheshti Universities of Medical Sciences were enrolled. Data were collected through 20 semi-structured interviews and two group meetings of 16 nurses with enough age and sex diversity, and analyzed by qualitative content analysis.

Results: After analysis, 11 main categories were identified: belief in religion, Quran and judgment day; belief in God, prophets and imams; perceiving philosophy and regulations of creation; theology and seeking help from God; seeking and worshipping God; perfect health; scientific and sacrificial nursing; satisfaction with life; reaching perfection and transcendence; meaning and objective in life and internal energy resources.

Conclusion: Oncology nurses experience spiritual health as believing in God and Quran, perceiving the mystery of creating and attempting to know God (religious health), having perfect health, scientific nursing, satisfaction with work and life, and seeking meaning and objective in life (existential health).

Key words: Spirituality, Spiritual Health, Oncology, Nurse



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Introduction

spirituality and health are two multidimensional constructs with complex natures^{1, 2}. A comprehensive review of literature reveals common issues when discussing combination of these two concepts in the form of spiritual health^{1,3,4}. Four dimensions considered in defining spiritual health include: affirmation of life in relationship with God, self, community, and the environment that rears and appreciates maturity of the individual^{5,6}. In Fisher's spiritual health model (1998) too, the four dimensions considered were individual, communal, environmental, and transcendental⁷. Spirituality and spiritual health are predictors of human health consequences, and with a holistic approach, provide important information about health care requirements and ability of individuals in coping with spiritual stresses and also necessary interventions for dealing with health care crisis⁸.

Spiritual health is a unique force that harmonizes physical, psychological, and social dimensions of the individual and prepares him for dealing with life crisis⁹. Spiritual health leads to a purposeful, happy, and meaningful life and provides him with the energy to continue life¹⁰. Ellison (1983) considers spiritual health as the condition of healthy spirit that like facial complexion or heart rate shows the individuals' satisfactory health. With spiritual health, human achieves transcendence, finds meaning in his life, and gains new perceptions for a meaningful social life¹⁰. Two dimensions are considered for spiritual health in relevant literatures: religious health (vertical dimension) that points to the individuals' healthy feelings in relationship with God, and existential health (horizontal dimension) dimension that explains the individuals' feelings toward meaning, purpose, and life satisfaction¹¹. The spiritual health features include: belief in a supreme force, the need to relate with others, inner harmony, maintaining self integrity and strong support

systems, care for nature and a sense of connection with the surrounding world¹. When spiritual health is endangered, the individual is affected by psychological disorders such as loneliness, depression, and loss of meaning in life¹².

In recent years, the organizational regulations for assessment of the spiritual conditions of individuals and in particular patients have increased including the emphasis by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, the World Health Organization, UK Council for Nurses, Midwives, and Health Visitors, code of ethics for Nurses - American Nurses Association, American Association of Colleges of Nursing, and the Canadian Council on Health Services Accreditation^{13, 14}.

In comparison with other health care workers, nurses tend to spend more time with patients. They play an important role in helping patients to find meaning and purpose in life, improve their health, and resolve disease crises, hospitalization and loss of loved ones. Nurses also help improve patients' relationship with God through values, quality of life and interactions¹⁵.

Studies have shown that there is a relationship between nurses' spiritual health and their perception toward spiritual care. Those with high spiritual health have a positive perspective on spiritual care and merge diagnoses of spiritual nursing more in their patient care programs. Also those with positive feeling about purpose of life and relationship with God, have a positive perception of the nurses' role in provision of spiritual care for patients^{15, 16}.

For a holistic, safe, efficient, and life giving nursing care for cancer patients, it is necessary for nurses, particularly oncology nurses to have a balance in their personal and professional lives, and understand their physical, psychological, social, and spiritual health for providing spiritual care¹⁰. To provide spiritual care for the patients, it is necessary for nurses

to be aware of their own spirituality and spiritual health. Health professionals and nurses should pay attention to their spiritual health and have a deep understanding of their own beliefs and spiritual values before assessing their patients' spiritual health¹¹. Given that spirituality and spiritual health are mental and abstract concepts, it appears necessary to conduct a qualitative research to define the experiences of oncology nurses about spiritual health in their personal and professional lives and also to discover its nature and dimensions. Considering review of the inland literature on spiritual health of nurses and particularly oncology nurses in Iran, there has been only a limited study with a quantitative approach carried out, and none with a qualitative approach could be found in respect of experience of spiritual health. Thus, the aim of the present study is to discover and define the experience of spiritual health of oncology nurses with a qualitative content analysis approach.

Methods

In this phenomenological qualitative research, 24 oncology nurses, employed at 12 teaching hospitals of Tehran and Shahid Beheshti Universities Medical Sciences were studied for 6 months. The data obtained from interviews were analyzed through a qualitative content analysis technique. This technique includes a collection of methods used for analysis of written literature obtained from interviews (17). Participants were of sufficient diversity in terms of employment history, age, gender, ethnicity, employment and marital status so as to achieve a variety of experiences. The study inclusion criteria were being a Muslim, being a volunteer, and working in adult oncology department for [at least] two years. Accordingly, 4 nurses had to be excluded as they worked at the children oncology department. Data were collected through semi-structured

interviews with 20 oncology nurses. To increase the quality of information obtained in the interviews, two separate meetings with a condensed group of 16 oncology nurses were organized to discover the nature and dimensions of mental and abstract concepts of spiritual health. Those in the condensed group did not take part in individual interviews.

The participants were presented with necessary information about the aims of the study, and then a consent form for recording interviews, anonymity, and confidentiality was signed by the participants. Two of the participants refused to have their interviews recorded, so notes had to be taken down. The permission to conduct the research was obtained from the research deputy of Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences. Interviews were conducted in the form of questions, and to encourage nurses, responses were recorded in narratives. They were immediately transcribed. After accurately reading interviews several times by the researcher, they were encoded for initial classification and then analyzed. Firstly, the interviews were divided into semantic data units and then summarized for conversion into codes. Different codes were compared and classified according to differences and similarities. To find the essence of the information, initial classes were discussed and reviewed by two researchers^{18, 19}. In order to enhance the credibility and acceptability of data, simultaneous analysis of data, selection of main specialists, time merger, verification and ongoing observation, detailed and deep description, and review of observers were used²⁰.

Results

By the end of analysis, 11 main categories were identified which included: belief in religion, Quran, and judgment day; belief in God, prophets, and imams; understanding philosophy and laws of creation;

theology and seeking help from God, seeking and worshipping God; perfect health; scientific and sacrificial nursing; satisfaction with life; reaching perfection and transcendence; meaning and objective in life and internal energy resources.

For ease of codification, some of the narratives of experiences of oncology nurses are stated below.

“Working in the oncology department, I see myself closer to death. I don’t think much about the material world. This always gives me an inner peace”.

“People must have support in life and be attached to something and committed to principles of life”. “I see spiritual health in belief in God, prophets, and imams. This influences my behavior in life and at work”.

Codes derived from these quotations are:

- Spiritual health means accepting death and attaining inner peace
- Spiritual health means not having a materialistic perspective on everything
- Spiritual health means belief in a supreme power (God) and commitment to life principles
- Spiritual health means belief in God, prophets, and imams
- Spiritual health means believing in the impact of religion on personal behavior

Another example of quotes from nurses:

“At every moment, in nursing, I trust in God. Every morning when going to hospital, I remember God by utterance of- in the name and hope of God-. With irreconcilable life and work problems I find shelter in God and seek his help. It satisfies me when I am able to assist a cancer patient, as I think God forgives my sins and helps me”.

The codes associated with this narrative and experiences of a 28-year-old female participant with 4-year-work history in the oncology department included:

- Spiritual health means trust in God and constant utterance of his name as a reminder.

- Spiritual health means seek refuge in God and ask for His help

- Helping patients helps forgiveness of the nurse’s sins and a way to reach spiritual health.

Belief in religion, Quran, and judgment day

According to the results, this has been oncology nurses’ top priority, and majority of them help

their spiritual health by prayers and performing other religious practices, regular reading of the

Quran, remembering God in everyday life and

nursing work. Islam and Quran are important to

Muslim oncology nurses, as they believed that

Mohammad is God’s messenger and Quran is the

celestial book of Muslims that was revealed to the

prophet. A 27-year-old oncology nurse expressed:

“I am a Muslim nurse and believe in the Unity of

God, Mohammad as the prophet, imams and resur-

rection. In my view, nursing is a pious and charita-

ble profession and I seek God in the care for cancer

patients”.

Resurrection also was an important issue for the

participants, as Muslims believe that life after death

is a continuation of the worldly life in which God

audits his servants’ deeds, as promised in the Quran.

Majority of participants argued that understanding

philosophy of faith, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage and

performing religious practices such as attending re-

ligious centers, mosques, pilgrimage to the tomb of

the prophet and imams are ways to prosper in the

world hereafter. These are the main foundations of

Islam. Islamic practices and behaviors, as logic and

theology, affect social, cultural, behavioral, nutri-

tion, and language of people²⁰. A female nurse with

24-year work experience expressed:

“Belief in God, prophet, and Quran has been my

guide in life and I have seen its direct and positive

effects on my lifestyle, behavior, and family”. She

added, “Too much attention to physical and material

aspects of the world, collecting money and efforts to gain power and social status prevents enhancement of spiritual health of human". Meanwhile, 3 participants believed that, "In today's modern world, for complete and comprehensive patient care with full energy and time, nurses should have a better financial status".

Understanding philosophy and laws of creation:

Understanding the philosophy of creation of man and nature with all its mysteries and beauty is a powerful way to discover the grandeur of God. Islam and Muslims holy book place great emphasis on the purposefulness of creation, and stress self-awareness as an introduction to theology²¹. This is also one of the expressions of spirituality and spiritual health evaluation scales in other religions²². The oncology nurses regard deep understanding of philosophy of creation of man and universe as one of the ways to gain spiritual health, and emphasized thinking about mysteries of creation. A 32-year-old female participant expressed:

"Where does human come from, why has he come, and where is he going to, are questions that clarify the mission of man in this and hereafter world. This is an expression of the purpose of creation and mission of human in this world. We must endeavor to carry out this mission in the best possible manner at home or at work".

Seeking and worship of God:

As expected, oncology nurses' priority was seeking God, and majority of them expressed their need for God with prayers, reading Quran, remembering God in daily affairs, belief in presence and observance of God in nursing work and in life. Seeking God was important for oncology nurses, as in their belief, God is the creator of all creatures and they should be

days with the name and memory of God. A 27-year-old male oncology nurse said "I am a Muslim nurse who believes in unity of God, Mohammad as the prophet, imams and resurrection. In my view, nursing is a pious and charitable profession and I seek God in the care for cancer patients.

Having unity and uniformity (perfect health):

For a holistic, safe, efficient, and life saving nursing care for cancer patients, it is necessary for nurses, particularly oncology nurses to have balance in their personal and professional lives, and realize their physical, psychological, social, and spiritual health for providing spiritual care¹⁰.

To enjoy perfect health, it is necessary to have unity and uniformity among nurses' systems. They must have perfect health in the physical, social, psychological, and spiritual terms in order that they can care for their patients.

A -27year-old male participant stated:

"I try to maintain my physical, psychological and social health and reduce stress at work and in life to a minimum, be proactive in improving family and work relations, and pay attention to spiritual matters in life. Cooperation and harmony in all these are necessary for continuing my life."

Scientific and sacrificial nursing:

Nursing is a dynamic and evolving profession. It grows and develops in tandem with discovery of secrets of creation of man by medical sciences. Acquiring knowledge coupled with necessary skills, together with sacrifice is needed for patient's total care (10). Nurses play an important role in assisting patients to find meaning and purpose in life, and also help improving patients' relationship with God through values, quality of life and improved desired social relationships (38). Oncology nurses regard these nursing roles as a means for gaining spiritual

Table 1: Semantic units and codes derived from interviews with participants.	
Semantic units	codes
Belief in the role of religion, responsibility for religious principles	Belief in religion, acceptance of principles
Belief in accountability and audit of deeds in the after life	Belief in resurrection
Belief in God, belief in a supreme force, belief in existence of God	Belief in God
Understanding philosophy of creation of man and nature	Understanding philosophy of creation
Belief in natural laws, acceptance of creation laws, acceptance of death	Acceptance of laws
Seeking relationship with God, constant relationship with God	Relationship with God
Worshiping God, constantly remembering God	Worshiping God
Trust in God, seeking refuge in God, constant need of God, requesting God's grant	Trust in God, requesting help
Trying to solve cancer patient's problems, respect human dignity, attention to the needs of cancer patients	Care for cancer patients
Having social reputation, having a healthy social relationship, having support in life, being a support among relatives and colleagues	Having healthy sociability
Achieving spiritual prosperity, achieving inner peace, sense of journey beyond	Transcendence
Meaning in life, ability to find meaning and purpose in life	Seeking meaning in life
Purpose in life, setting realistic goals in life, having a stable life, commitment to principles of life	Having a purpose in life

health that is also an aspect of existential health. In this respect, a participant stated:

“Oncology nurses should study and acquire experience of various human diseases. Additionally, at times, self-sacrifice is also necessary in the oncology ward and nurses do not expect financial rewards for their difficult and stressful work. The spiritual aspect of work reveals itself here”.

Job and life satisfaction:

One of the dimensions of spiritual health is the feeling of satisfaction with life, which is a consequence of finding meaning, value, and purpose in life⁸. This concept is also associated with life, innovative energy, perfection of personal spirit and the dimension of uniform health, belief in the supreme force and enhancement of person's inner resources. Spiritual health of nurses evolves over a lifetime and its dimensions are constantly affected by relationships between emotions, thoughts, and

Table 2: categories and themes indicating experience of spiritual health in oncology nurses

Codes	Categories	Motifs
<p>Belief in religion and obeying religious commands, belief in Quran, belief in judgment day, preservation of religious values.</p> <p>Belief in God, belief in grandeur of God, belief in prophets and imams.</p> <p>Understanding philosophy of creation, acceptance of laws, and acceptance of divine plan.</p> <p>Trust in God and seeking help, trying to understand theology.</p> <p>Importance of prayer in life, worshiping God, relationship with God</p>	<p>Belief in religion, Quran, judgment day</p> <p>Belief in God, prophets, and imams</p> <p>Understanding philosophy of laws of creation</p> <p>Theology and seeking God's help</p> <p>Seeking and worship of God</p>	<p>Religious health</p>
<p>Psychological health, physical health, healthy social relationship, having social health, acceptance of others.</p> <p>Sacrificial nursing, constant gaining of knowledge and skills, complete care for cancer patients.</p> <p>Satisfaction with nursing and life, hope for future, happiness in life.</p> <p>Spiritual self enhancement, achieving inner peace, feeling of journey beyond.</p> <p>Finding meaning of life, having a purpose in life, commitment to principles of life, acceptance of life</p>	<p>Having unity and uniformity (perfect health)</p> <p>Scientific and sacrificial nursing</p> <p>Feeling satisfied with life work</p> <p>Transcendence</p> <p>Meaning and purpose in life</p>	<p>Existential health</p>

social interactions. Nurses' positive attitude and satisfaction with spiritual care lead to happiness of both patients and nurses¹⁴. A young female oncology nurse stated, "Even though working with dying cancer patients is hard and affects nurses' mental status, I'm happy I can care for these patients, so they are satisfied with me and pray for me, and it feels as if the path of my spiritual journey is being paved".

Achieving transcendence:

Participants described transcendence as finding psychological peace, being loved by others, feeling of happiness, and the journey beyond in life, also forgiveness of sins by God. A participant said; "I felt comfortable when I came to the oncology ward. My behavior changed because I realized that patients had a lot of needs, and caring for them helps me toward transcendence". Another participant expressed, "As an oncology nurse, I am liked by my family, patients and their families. In my view, working with cancer patients in final stages

causes my sins to be forgiven by God. Ultimately, in some cases, I feel I am in touch with a superior force when I help patients with advanced cancer". We regard this kind of feeling as "journey beyond material world".

Meaning and purpose in life:

Spirituality as human existence enables people to find meaning and purpose in life and reach transcendence. Spiritual health provides a person with a feeling of survival, purpose, happiness, and energy⁹. All participants agreed that human is a multi-dimensional being that has a purpose in life and that life is meaningful and valuable. He must try to identify his capabilities and employ them in the service and care for the patients, particularly cancer patients in need of support. A participant commented:

"Human is a creature with purpose, he must try to recognize his creator and be thankful. The main mission of nurses is to serve those in need especially cancer patients who have lost meaning and hope in life".

A young male nurse made this remark about his purpose in life: "My main aim in life is to reach humanity especially in spiritual matters".

Belief in God, prophets, and imams:

Acceptance of and belief in God and prophets is one of the most important indicators of religiosity and religious recognition and beliefs²¹. This had a huge importance in creating spiritual health for oncology nurses. Participants considered belief in existence of God, grandeur of God, and the mission of prophets as the basis for spiritual health. One participant remarked: "I believe in the existence of God as the creator of heaven, earth, and all creatures and Mohammad as his prophet. I endeavor to understand imams more and follow the commands of Quran. I owe

my spiritual health to moving in this direction".

Source of internal energy:

In the conceptual meaning of spirituality, participants referred to themselves and related their understanding of spirituality to beliefs, meaning, and purpose, and also life experiences⁸. All participants in this study considered their spirituality as a source of energy for continuing life. In their words; spirituality is a force that helps them to have a good perspective on life and challenges ahead. An elderly participant stated:

"I like my life and my beliefs give directions to my life. For me, the real spirituality is my work experience in the oncology ward. I deal with people who think about who they were and what they did. In review of life and dealing with its challenges, spirituality gives me energy in these cases".

Discussion:

The most outstanding theme given by majority of nurses for spiritual health was "belief in God and his worship". They performed practices of prayers and worship of God in an attempt to strengthen their relationship with God and seek God. Seeking God through prayers plays an important role in life and enhancement of spiritual health of Muslim oncology nurses. These results concur with Hosein Rassol study²¹. Participants in their study expressed that religious practices such as worship often helped people connect with their own spirituality. Going to the mosque, too, can be a means of communication for groups who feel safe in the mosque and have a sense of belonging²¹. The results of this study were in agreement with Halligan's results that expressed "relationship with God as a spiritual need for Christian cancer patients in America"²³. The concurrence of these studies indicates that theology is the foundation of all religions, and the influence

of cultural differences is negligible. Muslims believe that prayer is the best form of worship, and if it is accepted by God, then other practices of worship will also be accepted by God²⁴. Satisfaction with work and life was another issue experienced by participants in respect of spiritual health.

A study by Van Dover and Baccon revealed that nurses were more at ease in assessing spiritual needs of others²⁵, and those with high spiritual health tend to have a positive outlook on spiritual care. In other words, some participants stated that spirituality has influenced their work and enabled them to understand the spiritual needs of patients. The results of present study also concurred with those of study by Socken and Carson in which participants stated that they did not feel at ease without relationship with God to discuss problems and concerns about necessary spiritual care²⁶. It appears, in the present study, that nurses' feeling of satisfaction with life and work is due to the positive influence of spiritual experience and religious health on their work.

Another theme was the experience of reaching transcendence which revealed itself in a dynamic form as a constant search for reinforcement and enhancement through relationship with a superior force. Understanding the nature of spirituality only through objective analysis is difficult although in this study spirituality was understood through such concepts as achieving inner peace, journey to the beyond, movement toward forgiveness of sins, feeling of happiness, and combination of these concepts. These results agree with the results of studies by Beckvar, Tanni and Burghard, and Naggaie-Jacobson^{8, 27, 28}. Agreement of this study with others in the cultural context of religions of Christianity and Judaism could indicate that spirituality is a global concept and practice of spiritual recommendations of different religions lays the foundation for the salvation and transcendence of humanity. A study by Stool

and Stahlwood showed reaching spiritual transcendence as an eminent sign of spirituality¹⁰.

Another theme of this study was scientific and sacrificial nursing. According to the literature, nursing is a sacrificial profession and while paying attention to a holistic approach in care, nurses should constantly update their knowledge and skills. In a study by Simino, it was revealed that the ease with which nurses perform their spiritual care is related to their spiritual health⁵. Nurses' spiritual health affects their perspective on performance of spiritual care. Nurses' perspectives that indicate their beliefs regard spiritual care as a nursing duty that should be accompanied by sacrifice for patients¹⁴.

Another important theme was having meaning and purpose in personal and professional life. This dimension has been mentioned in majority of quantitative and qualitative studies of nursing as the most eminent attribute of spirituality and existential health. The results of this study agree with those of studies by Faust and Nable³⁰, Burk³¹, Clark³² in which seeking meaning and purpose is considered the most important indicator of existential health. Also, recognition of purpose and meaning in life is the axis of spirituality in the holistic approach of nursing theory that shows maturity of individuals and their relationship with a superior force³².

All participants in this study considered spirituality as a source of internal energy for continuing life. In their words, spirituality is a force that helps them in having a good perspective on life and challenges ahead. This result was in agreement with the results of the study by Tock and Pollen, in which participants experienced spirituality as a strong source of internal energy²².

Having unity and uniformity (perfect health) was another aspect of spiritual health that oncology nurses considered necessary for holistic, safe, effective, and life saving nursing care for a balanced

personal and professional life³³. Maraviglia and Stool found similar results in their studies and considered merger of mind, body, and spirit necessary for achieving spirituality and spiritual health in individuals^{11, 34}.

Belief in religion, the holy Quran, the mystery of creation of man and the judgment day was another subject that Muslim oncology nurses thought necessary for maintenance of spiritual health. Participants in this study described religion in relation to beliefs as the unified part of spirituality. In their words, faith and beliefs have different meanings for different people. Meanwhile faith as a personal philosophy is a source of energy, comfort, and assurance, and belief in God leads them from darkness to light. These results agree with the results of studies by Hosein Rasool²¹, Khodayarifard et al²², Herman³⁵, and Burk³¹.

In relevant literature, there is a general consensus among writers and scholars that spiritual health is a sub-theme of spirituality³⁴. Also the complex nature and intertwined concepts of spirituality and religion have caused misunderstanding about equality of these concepts³⁵, and confusion of nurses^{36,37}. Therefore, discussion of results of this study was carried out with consideration for the above cases, which could be regarded as the research limitation.

Given the importance of spiritual health as an approach for conceptualization and understanding of individuals' spirituality in oncology nurses and also its role as a predictor of health consequences in people, knowing it can provide important information about people's capabilities for adjustment with spiritual stress and necessary interactions for meeting health care crises³⁹.

Also, given the professional responsibility of nurses for spiritual needs and spiritual care of patients, achieving peace and spiritual health for nurses is the

first step toward development of awareness and sensibility to spiritual needs of patients. Spirituality and spiritual health of nurses influence their personal and professional lives. The ability of nurses to participate in holistic nursing depends on their personal and professional maturity and more seriously on spiritual maturity. If nurses neglect their own spiritual health, it seems that they may face difficulties in identifying spiritual needs and performing spiritual care for their patients.

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