



EXPERIENCE OF SPIRITUALITY IN WOMEN DIAGNOSED WITH BREAST CANCER

VIVÊNCIA DA ESPIRITUALIDADE EM MULHERES DIAGNOSTICADAS COM CÂNCER DE MAMA

LA EXPERIENCIA DE LA ESPIRITUALIDAD EN LAS MUJERES DIAGNOSTICADAS CON CÁNCER DE MAMA

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ABSTRACT






Objective: to analyze the experience of spirituality in women diagnosed with breast cancer. **Method:** this is a qualitative, descriptive study, with eight women, through open interviews, recorded and fully transcribed and analyzed according to Content Analysis technique in the modality of Categorical Analysis. **Results:** the women's speeches evidenced expressions of spirituality, presence of fear and sadness about the diagnosis, generating concerns and doubts, but the presence of the faith in the Divine as a way to show their appreciation and recognition of His action in the course of the disease brings the hope of healing in conjunction with the presence of the family, being these strategies used by women to cope with cancer. **Conclusion:** women use spirituality as a coping strategy during their experience with the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer. **Descriptors:** Spirituality; Breast Neoplasm; Religion; Mental Health; Quality of Life; Professional Competence.

RESUMO

Objetivo: analisar a vivência da espiritualidade em mulheres diagnosticadas com câncer de mama. **Método:** trata-se de estudo qualitativo, do tipo descritivo, com oito mulheres, por meio de entrevistas abertas, gravadas, transcritas na íntegra e analisadas conforme a técnica de Análise de Conteúdo na modalidade Análise Categorical. **Resultados:** verificou-se nas falas das mulheres expressões da espiritualidade, a presença do medo e da tristeza sobre o diagnóstico, gerando preocupações e dúvidas, mas a presença da fé no Divino como forma de mostrar seu apreço e reconhecimento da ação Dele no curso da doença, traz a esperança de cura em conjunto com a presença da família, sendo estas estratégias utilizadas pelas mulheres para o enfrentamento do câncer. **Conclusão:** conclui-se que as mulheres utilizam a espiritualidade como estratégia de enfrentamento durante sua vivência com o diagnóstico e o tratamento do câncer de mama. **Descritores:** Espiritualidade; Neoplasias da Mama; Religião; Saúde Mental; Qualidade de Vida; Competência Profissional.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: analizar la experiencia de la espiritualidad en las mujeres diagnosticadas con cáncer de mama. **Método:** este es un estudio cualitativo, descriptivo, con ocho mujeres, a través de entrevistas abiertas, grabadas y transcritas y analizadas de acuerdo a la técnica de análisis de contenido en la modalidad de análisis categórico. **Resultados:** se encontró en los discursos de las mujeres expresiones de espiritualidad, la presencia del miedo y la tristeza acerca del diagnóstico, generando inquietudes y dudas, pero la presencia de la fe en la Divinidad, como una manera de mostrar su agradecimiento y reconocimiento de su acción en el curso de la enfermedad, trae la esperanza de curación en conjunción con la presencia de la familia, siendo estas estrategias utilizadas por las mujeres para lidiar con el cáncer. **Conclusión:** se concluye que las mujeres usan la espiritualidad como una estrategia de subsistencia durante su experiencia en el diagnóstico y tratamiento del cáncer de mama. **Descriptores:** Espiritualidad; Neoplasias de la Mama; Religión; Salud Mental; Calidad de Vida; Competencia Profesional.

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How to cite this article

Silva WB da, Barboza MTV, Calado RSF, Vasconcelos JLA, Carvalho MVG de. Experience of spirituality in women diagnosed with breast cancer. J Nurs UFPE on line. 2019;13:e241325 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5205/1981-8963.2019.241325>

INTRODUCTION

Breast cancer is an abnormal and excessive division of cells, considered a multifactorial disease and associated with factors, such as: age of first menstruation less than 12 years, menopause after 55 years, nulliparity, first pregnancy after 30 years, the use of certain contraceptives and hormone replacement therapy (HRT) in menopause, exposure to ionizing radiation, consumption of alcoholic beverages, hypercaloric diets, sedentary lifestyle and genetic predisposition. Estimates show that breast cancer in Brazil is the most incident type of cancer in female sex, excluding non-melanoma skin cancer.¹

Cancer has a social stigma of incurable disease, thus, life expectation of patients are affected by the feeling of fear facing the unwanted experiences they will have to go through. After the diagnosis of cancer, a door opens, leading to an uncertain, painful, prolonged, distressing and terrifying treatment, which often weakens the plans for the future and makes imminent the possibility of dying. Therefore, patients and their relatives, in the face of hopelessness and suffering caused by the discovery of the disease, seek spirituality in a positive or negative meaning of experiences.²

Spirituality is a term broader than religion, and relates to the manner by which people seek and express the meaning and purpose of life. Religion, in turn, is one of the possible forms of expression of spirituality, it identifies, approaches and assists in the access to the Divine and is supported by a set of scriptures or teachings.³

When the woman receives the diagnosis of breast cancer and the information that she must undergo chemotherapy, she is affected by numerous stressing sensations and that could leave her anxious. The way this woman will face this peculiar moment in her life and make decisions is of paramount importance, considering that, if she can make use of coping strategies that best fit that time, and if they are successful, they will allow her experience and be able to overcome this moment in the best possible way, minimizing the anxiety and stress, but if the coping strategy is not effective, it can be disastrous, and may generate more anguish and increase levels of anxiety.⁴

Spirituality helps people with cancer resist pressures and physical and psychological discomforts in such a way it promotes their well-being. Therefore, it can help both patients as family members, nurses and other professionals who work in the area cope more calmly situations of imminent death or death itself.⁵ Thus, spirituality is an approach to care that aims to improve the quality of life of women and family members, who are facing a clinical condition that threatens the continuity of life, by means of

prevention, assessment and treatment of pain and psychosocial and spiritual support.⁶

OBJECTIVE

- To analyze the experience of spirituality in women diagnosed with breast cancer.

METHOD

This is a qualitative, descriptive study, carried out in the period from March 2018 to April 2019, with women diagnosed with breast cancer, totaling eight samples. The selection of participants based on the following inclusion criteria: women aged over 18 years, diagnosed with breast cancer, users of the health service where data collection took place and who agreed to be interviewed and signed the ICF.

Data were collected by means of interviews open to information from women met in the *Centro de Oncologia de Caruaru* (CEOC, *Center of Oncology of Caruaru*). It consists of a technique in which the interviewer introduces him/herself to the interviewee and formulates questions, with the objective of obtaining data of interest for the research. The questions that guided the interview were: “What are you feeling right now due to the diagnosis of breast cancer?; How was your faith before the diagnosis?; How do you manifest your spiritual practice? Do you seek it in something/someone?; What are your aspirations for the future?”.

Four meetings took place in the CEOC on alternate days with the interviewees in the morning, with each interview lasting between 3 and 4 minutes, and occurring in a quiet location within the health establishment where they underwent their treatment and responsibility of the leading researchers.

The statements of the interviewees were recorded, transcribed and organized, subsequently analyzing them by the Content Analysis technique in the Categorical Analysis modality.⁷

After data transcription, the participants' identities were preserved, identifying them by their initials and age, for example: (S43); (Z59).

This study is part of a matrix research entitled: “The experience of spirituality in women diagnosed with breast cancer”, approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University Center Tabosa de Almeida under opinion 2.942.377 and CAAE: 96425818.6.0000.5203 on October 04, 2018.

RESULTS

The thematic data analysis provided for the advent of four categories: “The feeling regarding the diagnosis”; “Women's faith before and after the diagnosis”; “Spiritual practices as strategies

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for coping with cancer” and “The expectations for the future after treatment”.

• The feeling regarding the diagnosis

The interviewees’ statements reveal the feelings present when facing the diagnosis of breast cancer, with the expressed desire to be strong and overcome their difficulties.

[...] It is so sad, right? [...] We have to be strong to be able to fight and overcome it. [J34]

[...] Fear is the feeling [...] I feel strong and I have support, right? That is all that matters. [Z59]

[...] Sometimes, it scares me a little [...]. [J34] I feel strong, it is a feeling of faith to face everything that is happening [...]. [M47]

I feel peace, I am peaceful [...]. [S40]

[...] I am feeling like my Faith has grown stronger [...] so has my strength. [M55]

[...] I feel happy because God has already get me prepared [...] I do not fear difficulty anymore [...]. [E50]

The speeches evidenced that many women feel fear and sadness after the diagnosis, however, they seek strength in their faith to give continuity to the treatment.

• Women’s Faith before and after the diagnosis

This category demonstrates faith as the main source of spiritual comfort, which assists in the approximation of the interviewees with God, who accompanies and supports them during all moments, because, for them, it is the only one capable of promoting the relief of suffering and the healing of diseases.

The same as today, faith and strength and if you do not have God in your life, you fall [...]. [M55]

[...] I have always had faith in God. Because, without faith, we cannot win anything in this life. [M47]

[...] I has not changed at all, I have Always had faith in God [...] My faith has always been strong. [J34]

I had faith and now it is growing stronger and stringer [...] Because I believe God is in control [...]. [Z59]

All my life, I have had faith in God [...]. [E50]

I have always trusted in God [...] I believe my faith even stronger now with this problem. [S40]

For the research participants, faith is the main reference of support before and after diagnosis of the disease. They mention God as an omnipotent and omniscient being, who helps them feel strong to accept the diagnosis of the disease. The participants of this research speak of the Divine as a way to show their appreciation for Him and recognize His action in their life.

Experience of spirituality in women diagnosed...

• Spiritual practices as strategies for coping with cancer

The women were asked about their spiritual practices that help them emotionally after receiving the diagnosis. Adopting these practices bring them the feeling of comfort and strength to give continuity to the treatment.

[...] I read the bible, right? That is where I find a great comfort. [S40]

[...] Seeking more people, my friends and God [...]. [Z59]

I go to the church whenever I can [...] and I am Always reading the bible at home [...]. [M47]

I meditate alone with my prayers, wehether in the living room or in my bedroom, weherever I am [...]. [M55]

Praising, I love to praise and I feel very peaceful [...]. [T76]

[...] Every thursday I go to tell my beads [...] it gives me strength. [S43]

When I am feeling afflicted, I speak to God [...]. [E50]

Attending the church, reading the bible, meditating, listenning to and singing religious songs, as well as sharing moments between friends and family, are spiritual practices that women perform in the search for spiritual comfort and strength that help them in coping with the treatment.

• The expectations for the future after treatment

Women were asked about their expectations for the future after the treatment, health and happiness were assigned to the questions. The answers showed the concern to keep a better quality of life, possibility of cure and feelings directed to family members:

May I go back to work, I really like working [...]. [M47]

Achieving the cure, getting cured [...]. [S40]

[...] I expect good things, health, peace, that is all we hope for [...]. [T76]

[...] I looking forward to getting cured, right? [...] Everybody wants to get rid of this disease. [M55]

First of all, being happy, right? With my children [...]. [J34]

God curing me [...] Live a normal life as before. [Z59]

The statements evidence that there is hope to be healed and continue their work routines and experiences of everyday life.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed that after receiving the diagnosis of breast cancer, women experience the feelings of fear and sadness, especially because they associate cancer with suffering and death. However, they experience the feelings of hope and strength to fight the disease, which emerge

from their faith and become a defense mechanism to face the treatment.

In the literature, the feelings of sadness, anger and anguish usually result from the meaning of cancer, as a stigmatizing disease, which brings suffering, which is maintained in the patient's thoughts, and, with it, the feeling of fear toward death becomes more and more present, in its various stages, from diagnosis to treatment.⁸ These feelings may intensify the suffering of women and even hinder the possibility to move on with their projects and ideals of life, but the straining of these problems might be alleviated as coping strategies, cited in several studies, such as the strength of faith and religious beliefs, i.e., ways of expressing the spirituality found by each one to deal with one's own disease.⁹

Finding out about cancer involves negative feelings such as depression, anger, sadness, grief, despair, as well as the feeling that people do not understand the suffering through which they are passing. When the woman passes through this situation of disease, the most common feeling is anguish, because death becomes present and there is a threat to her self-image, leading to use the unconscious defense mechanisms to deal with the situation.¹⁰⁻⁹

Therefore, negative feelings derive mainly from the enormous challenge that this disease represents for individuals, their families and professionals. The physical and psychosocial wellbeing affects greatly from the perception of the early signs and symptoms until the moment of the diagnosis and initiation of treatment, and major changes occur in the life of the patient and his/her family, originating questions directed to life, disease and death.¹¹

In this study, regarding the relationship between spirituality and cancer, the interviewees reported primarily about their faith, belief in God and positive thinking. The interviewees were allowed to perform a self-analysis about the presence of faith, before and after receiving the diagnosis of breast cancer, and found that the faith expresses itself as a guiding aspect in the search for meaning and hope for spiritual comfort, even before their illness.

Another study evidenced that one of the ways to cope with adverse situations, such as receiving the diagnosis of cancer and death, directly relates to the feeling of faith and strength of religious beliefs, i.e., ways of expressing spirituality. This faith is a feeling persevering in our culture and is as necessary as other ways of coping. The spiritual dimension occupies a prominent place in the lives of people, in addition to becoming essential that health professionals know the spirituality of people who experience the illness, when planning nursing care and any other assistance to health.¹²

Cancer is considered an incurable disease and with difficult acceptance due to its negative meanings. Therefore, people seek to deal with this situation positively, facing it as a life mission, and demonstrating their spirituality as an expression of the identity and purpose of life through their own history and illness. The relief of suffering happens as religious faith enables transformations in the perspective through which the patient and family perceive the severe disease.¹³

This study revealed that spirituality is the main way of coping with cancer women use, and defined by spiritual practices that they had chosen and use to become stronger emotionally. The statements of the interviewees who attend the church, read the bible, meditate, listen to and sing religious songs, are practices that express an inner search for themselves and their meanings constructed through their beliefs, values and principles, in order to redeem the meaning of life and find the strength to continue the treatment of the disease.

The literature show that spirituality is capable of restoring faith, hope and support, bringing sense and/or meaning to suffering, and thus intensifying energies able to soften adversities such as the experience of cancer, because it mobilizes psycho mechanisms able to alleviate pain, suffering, fear and uncertainty. There is need to understand that the coping strategies are based on the strength and encouragement provided by the spiritual support, either through belief, faith, prayer and/or other mechanisms capable of transcending the physical/biological aspect and alleviating human suffering.¹⁴

Oncological patients undergo distinct periods since the discovery until the treatment of cancer, with the need of health professionals to consider the spiritual dimension of each one to address the hope and coping with the disease in the planning of assistance, and, to this end, it is essential to understand the vision of the world and the culture to which they belong, so that the relief of suffering happens as the spirituality and religious faith enable transformations in the perspective by which the person and his/her surroundings perceive the serious illness.⁸⁻¹⁵

This study reveals that, for the future, women crave the return to their routine before the illness, as well as seek cure in faith and belief in the Divine, because, when beginning treatment and experiencing the suffering caused by the disease, there is a greater connection with their spirituality, which fosters the search for ways to live based on the hope for cure with His intercession.

A research with cancer patients in palliative care revealed evidence that there is a search for meaning in the struggle and in the conviction of the experience of the process of becoming ill,

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which also brings resignification of values, so as to lead to reflections on the meaning of life and the importance of the daily struggle for its preservation, as well as the search for resources and support to deal with the suffering. There were various aspects that emerged in this study, allowing understanding that the spirituality of the participants provided for the search for meanings to live based on the hope for cure and return to their daily activities.¹⁶

The hope experienced by people with cancer is sustained in the daily struggle for life and faith/trust can be perceived as a form of defense to feelings of fear and anguish, because the approach of cancer involves them, hindering the management of the people affected. In the person's point of view, the cure of cancer is still not incorporated into the cultural repertoire as reality, a reason why it is conceived as a miracle and not as a phenomenon that can occur, even with the advances of science. Moreover, the person recognizes his/her right to seek alternatives for his/her own sake, but they should not interfere in his/her treatment, even though the association of medicine and spiritual practices have shown positive influence over physical and mental well-being throughout the health-disease process a human being.⁸⁻¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Women use spirituality as a coping strategy for dealing with the experience of diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer. The presence of the faith is visible in the interviewees' speeches, corroborated by the practice of the spirituality of those who use their beliefs as a condition of survival/existence to facilitate the temporary removal of thoughts related to disease, the negative feelings, such as fear and sadness and the stress of treatment, since faith is capable of providing life, even under the severity of the disease.

In this way, the practice of spirituality is essential in the diagnosis/treatment of these women. Presenting itself as an issue of paramount importance for the health, this article had as a limitation the restricted number of publications on the theme, alerting to the need for a greater understanding and studies, since the theme is indispensable for the practice developed by the nursing staff and all members of the multidisciplinary team, subsidizing as theoretical basis for the reception and integral assistance to users of health services and the development of professionals in their multiple dimensions - intellectual, social, affective and symbolic.

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Submission: 2019/05/28

Accepted: 2019/06/20

Publishing: 2019/07/14

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