Religious dimensions of suffering from and coping with cancer: A comparative study of Jewish and Christian patients

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Abstract

Introduction. The major aim of this research was to study religious coping styles among Christian and Jewish patients suffering from cancer. In addition, the empirical results were compared with the Jewish and Christian traditions of suffering.

Sample. A total of 100 Jewish and Christian cancer patients in Switzerland and in Israel consented to being interviewed about their religious coping styles.

Methods. For the collection and analysis of data, a grounded theory approach was applied. For the comparison of the empirical data with the traditional Jewish and Christian scriptures, content analysis and hermeneutics were used.

Results. The analysis shows that patients of both religious used the same five coping strategies. This research demonstrates that for most patients – though not for all – religiousness has great potential as a resource to help them coping in positive ways with cancer.

Conclusion. This resource should be utilized for the patients' benefit and further studied.

Keywords: Cancer; Suffering; Religion; Jews; Christians; Transcultural nursing

Introduction

The religious and spiritual dimensions of belief are rarely assessed by the health care team. We believe that spiritual and religious beliefs are a powerful source of inspiration. In the last 30 years, there have been few studies of religious and spiritual beliefs in cancer patients. The distinction between religion and spirituality is rarely discussed; however, potential differences between those transcendent aspects of coping that are and are not related to a formally defined religious frame of reference need characterization. The psychological literature on coping with cancer focuses most often, on coping psychologically and most often ignores spiritual coping strategies. Few studies, with the exception of Kubler-Ross, have examined dying patients. In this study, we sought to characterize and analyze the religious and spiritual aspects of coping among Jewish and Christian patients with cancer. We found no significant differences between the two religions and we identified five coping strategies based on religious and spiritual beliefs [1].

Methods

The initiative for this study lies in the author's own experience of caring for Jewish and Christian cancer patients, thereby experiencing differences and likenesses in their coping with suffering. Thus, the overall aim of this scientific investigation was to test the hypothesis that coping strategies among Jewish and Christian patients were the same. Anecdotal information suggested that patients framed their suffering experiences within a religious context; thus, the first objective was to characterize what religious motives Jewish and Christian cancer patients used when interpreting their suffering. The second objective was to compare these motives between the two groups. The third objective was to compare the patients’ motives with those traditional interpretations of suffering in Judaism (in the Old Testament, the Talmud and the Kabbala) and Christianity (in the New Testament and in Christian
Mysticism. In addition to the empirical part of the research, the inductively developed classification of religious motives was compared with the traditional motives identified through text analysis in biblical and rabbinical sources.

Results

A total of 100 cancer patients were consented and interviewed. Of these, 71 were Christians of various denominations (34 males, 37 females) and 29 were Jews adhering to various traditions (6 males, 23 females.) The patients were between 20 and 96 years old. They suffered from a range of types of cancer, in different stages of the illness; they had undergone a range of treatment and had a variety of prognoses. Fifteen of the Jews lived in Israel. All other informants lived in Switzerland at the time of the interview.

Stories of retaliation and return

All patients who interpreted their suffering within the concepts of retaliation and return assumed a basically good and merciful God. A common denominator of their stories was their instrumentalization of their suffering. They assumed that because they had apparently failed to comply with divine determination, God wanted to draw their attention to sins and errors they had committed. They considered their illness as a sign (punishment, warning, or teaching) for them to revise and redirect their lives to prevent worse occurring. A Jewish patient said: This illness saved my life. Without it I would have destroyed it. The patients felt guilty because they thought that they had done something wrong either towards themselves or towards others.

Stories about wrestling

Patients wrestling with God were utterly dissatisfied with and full of reproaches against him. Their anger originated in their frustrated belief in a personal and just God who would protect and reward them as long as they served him. They had assumed mutuality in their relationship with God. All biographies of those patients wrestling with God showed conscious efforts on their side to please him. Why did he unjustly let them down? The perceived absence of God during their, sometimes long, periods of severe suffering undermined their trust in him and raised serious questions about his integrity and fairness.

Stories of mercy

Several patients showed great humility vis-à-vis God and interpreted their suffering as God's will. One of them said: His will be done, another: It is not about fighting.... Or face the facts and trust in God. Most of these patients had what could be called religious biographies (were Christian nuns or clergymen or pious Jews), had undergone religious education over years. Eventually their attitude resulted in compliance with whatever destiny God provided them. Because the suffering was perceived as a merciful act which gave them an opportunity to make something of their lives, they did not see any necessity to fight against it.

Apocalyptic stories

Patients who perceived their suffering in apocalyptic terms associated worldly disasters with their personal distress and anguish. In this way, their suffering exceeded the personal realm and became generalized to something involving all humanity or something that was seen as part of the history of salvation. The world situation, including their personal fate, to them finally represented a process of increasing disintegration, the end of which was marked by the coming of the Messiah; or, more specifically, through personally to the bringing about of the messianic era and of final exemption.

Stories of mystical transfiguration

Something is going on, somebody, threw his evil eye on me; It is going to be for His glory; I know of things you don't know; were phrases typical for those patients who transformed their suffering into something mystical or magical. The religious thinking of these patients turned their tumors into a spiritual entity that pervaded and inspired them in exhilarating ways. Some looked for amulets, texts, and pictures or for magical letters to ban the evil influence. The patients transforming their suffering into a mystical or magical experience had a great ability to animate objects giving them a miraculously active role in their illness or in the healing process. They had visions, heard voices, or underwent unusual experiences, such as out-of-body experiences.

Conclusions

There were no statistically significant differences between the coping strategies or religious motives of the Jewish and Christian patients. The five coping strategies were similar in both groups and they believed these strategies were based in the writings of their faith. Patients were noted to move among denial, anger, depression, exhilaration, and acceptance throughout the interviewing process.

Reference