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Healing Connections: On Moving from Suffering to a Sense of Well-Being

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Abstract

Life-threatening illness is an assault on the whole person—physical, psychological, social, and spiritual. It frequently presents caregiver and sufferer with a paradox—suffering does not correlate with physical well-being alone. Drawing on a purposive sample of 21 participants, a phenomenological study was carried out to explore the relevance of the existential and spiritual domains to suffering, healing, and quality of life (QOL). The phenomenological method was used to achieve an in-depth description of both existential suffering, and conversely, the experience of integrity and wholeness, in persons with life-threatening illness; identify “inner life” and existential contributors to suffering and subjective well-being in advanced illness; and develop a narrative account of these QOL extremes. The importance of meaning-based adaptation to advanced illness was supported, as were Frankl's sources of meaning and Yalom's

sources of existential anguish. Divergent themes characteristic of the two QOL extremes were identified. Four types of "healing connections" involving a sense of bonding to Self, others, the phenomenal world, and ultimate meaning, respectively, were identified. They situated the participant in a context that was greater and more enduring than the self, thus leading to enhanced meaning and QOL. The assumptions underlying the construct "health-related QOL" are questioned.



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Key Words

Suffering; healing; quality of life; response shift; meaning; qualitative research

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