

Praising God in Promoting Mental Health in Cancer Patients

Abstract

Cancer is used as a general term for a large group of diseases that affect any part of the body. Cancer will be the leading cause of death by the year 2030 according to studies. Cancer patients mostly worry about their survival, they feel pain, and this can seriously affect their mental state. It is said that cancer is not just an event with a finishing point, rather, it is a permanent and ambiguous situation with many psychological side effects. An adaptation disorder with anxiety and depression is the most prevalent psychiatric disorder in cancer patients, according to studies. The purpose of this study is to investigate how praising God can promote spiritual health in cancer patients. The results of this study showed that praising God, prayer, hope, and patience brings peace of mind and prevents further anxiety and depression in cancer patients. It is important to strive to utilize these spiritual factors even when obtaining medical care and assistance from professionals.

Keywords: *Cancer, Health, Praising of God, Patients, Mental Health*

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1. Introduction

Disease patterns have dramatically changed nowadays due to changes in lifestyle, which has increased cancer rates. It has been predicted that cancer will become the first and most important reason for death by 2030¹. Cancer is the second leading cause of death after cardiovascular disease, which without any effective prevention programs, will probably reach 20 million cases by the year 2030².

One of the main concerns of cancer as a health problem in the world and the priority of finding treatments is the growing number of patients, especially in Iran³. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 12% of deaths in Iran are due to cancer⁴.

Cancer is not only a life-threatening disease, but it also deprives a person of normal daily activities and creates numerous psychological problems for both the patient and their family. This disease can reduce life quality by challenging the experience of meaning in life⁵⁻⁶.

Even though cancer is not a reason for certain death anymore⁷ and the advancement of technology in health organizations has led to better treatments, people who are diagnosed with cancer will inevitably think about their death sooner or later⁸⁻⁹.

Diagnosis of cancer can turn into an existential crisis and threaten the patients' and their families' future¹⁰. Fear of death is considered to be common, but emotional reactions differ from patient to patient. People with different cultural and individual variables react differently to their illness or imminent death⁷.

Studies show that 50 to 85% of cancer patients suffer from some kind of psychiatric disorder, the most common of which is an adaptive disorder with anxiety and depression⁷, with anxiety being the main complaint in patients¹¹. Especially fear and anxiety about death, which are considered the most important psychological diagnoses in cancer patients⁸. These types of anxiety and constant fear are abnormal and can be

traced back to a person's personal beliefs¹². With the progression of the disease along with treatment, the disease threatens a person's life quality. Health workers pay more attention to the development of physical symptoms such as pain, nausea, and vomiting, and neglect psychological problems such as anxiety and fear of death⁸.

Attention to death is considered the most valuable and indisputable fact of life and its inevitable central role and ways of dealing with this reality are emphasized in existentialist psychology. According to the theory of panic disorder management, when human beings become aware of the inevitability of death, this consciousness, along with the innate human desire to be immortal, leads to a state of panic¹³.

All human beings think about death, but when diagnosed with a chronic disease, or during one's final days, the tendency to think about and fear death increases¹⁴, because of the conflict between the desire for life and the awareness of the certainty of death, creates anxiety which can lead to adaptive behaviors in individuals. People tend to choose a system of values and beliefs that give their lives purpose and meaning in such conditions¹⁵.

Spirituality has a great role in adapting to life's excitement and events. Spirituality refers to the constant search for meaning, purpose, and deep understanding of values and existing natural forces through which one can understand the meaning of life and control their anxiety. Studies show that spiritual health and greater immunity against diseases are directly related to one another. In addition, spiritual care leads to personal growth and increases life expectancy in patients¹⁶⁻¹⁷.

The philosophy of mental health is based upon living a happy life, and despair is a sign of incompatibility with life. Health workers are to create an environment for patients so they can come to terms with their conditions and find meaning in life until their last breath¹⁸⁻¹⁹⁻²⁰.

Frankl Viktor believed that work, love, or suffering can help make life meaningful. Humans need purpose and meaning to interpret life events and sufferings. Spirituality means searching for answers related to existence and life, as well as questions about the meaning of life²¹.

A study by Jaarsma et al. Showed that the experience of meaning in life is directly related to psychosocial adaptation and stress management in cancer patients²². Another study by Abolghasemi et al. showed decreases in depression and anxiety in female cancer patients after being treated with meaning-centered psychotherapy²³.

Meaning-centered psychotherapy can be extremely effective in controlling thoughts about the past and being more present in patients who suffer from incurable diseases or are on the verge of imminent death⁷; therefore, patients are motivated to put effort instead of spending their time in solitude².

The ability to find purpose in life helps a person understand the reason for his existence and realize that they should enjoy the rest of their life and face difficulties without anxiety, otherwise they will no longer strive to survive and take the time they have left for granted⁷.

A study by Hosseinian showed that meaning-centered psychotherapy increases life expectancy in cancer patients²¹. In addition, a study by Hedayatizadeh showed a direct relationship between spirituality and anxiety²⁴. However, no study has examined the effects of praising God on mental health in cancer patients.

2. The concept of mental health

There are several literal meanings of health, including; To be faultless, to be blameless; Liberation, salvation; Security; Well-being, health; Salvation; Overcoming a disease, healing; Peace, tranquility, healthy²⁵. The concept of health; a person who does not have a physical illness is usually called healthy, but a healthy person is someone that is also spiritually healthy and socially secure; Scientific research has shown that mental health may be the root and cause of many physical disabilities and mental and emotional disorders²⁶. Health and illness do not depend only on physiological conditions, but also on a person's mindset, emotions, and motivations²⁷. What is meant by psyche (Mentality) in the Holy Quran is in fact the "soul" (*Hajar / 29, Mojadele / 22*), "the heart" (*Baqarah / 10, Fath / 4*), "self" (*Baqarah / 233, Loghman / 34*), "core" (*Najm / 11, Ibrahim / 37*), "spirit" (*Esraa / 51, Araf / 43*) and the like. Therefore, according to the concepts of Health and Mentality, we can say that "Mental Health" means "well-being of the soul". In other words, peace of mind is also known as mental health.

3. Examples of praising God

3.1. Prayer

Islam pays special attention to religious beliefs and thoughts in educating human beings. As Vince Peel puts it: "the key to good mental health is change in the mental structure, and people must try to change their intellectual basis". Prayer refers to teaching, repetition, and indoctrination through which a person discovers a clear image of themselves and their Creator, as well as making better decisions in certain matters of life and in dealing with others. One of the special features of Imam Sajjad's (AS) prayers, which include connection with the Creator, connection with the universe, connection with friends, enemies, parents, children, etc. is that it contains general concepts. Therefore, prayer is effective in terms of themes and concepts.

The term prayer refers to attention and praising God, turning from others and seeking his help, in other words, a spiritual communication, or turning to the Creator of the universe and the beyond, expressing helplessness and servitude, and recognizing one's needs and requesting them from an infinite and needless source²⁸. Prayer consoles hearts and brings light, purity, and empowerment against life and worldly difficulties. Man is a small creature. When facing the infinite Creator, man finds himself even smaller, like a single drop of water against the ocean or a tiny particle against galaxies. Recognizing God's greatness leads man to feel the need to praise him. What connects this "nothingness" to "the all" is prayer. Many treat their anxiety, fear, stress, etc. in difficult times of hardship and crisis with "prayer". The Quran mentions:

"Take alms (zakat) from their property to purify and nurture them, and pray for them (when receiving zakat) that your prayer is their comfort and God hears all and knows all". According to this verse praying for each other brings ease and peace to the soul²⁹. Some practitioners believe that prayer has been effective in bettering patients' conditions in many cases. Therefore, treating patients with prayer can be considered one of the most effective methods. Prayer is extremely effective in treating mental illnesses, which results in physical health improvement³⁰.

3.2. Praising God

In addition to natural and materialistic factors, spirituality has a great effect on treating diseases, including praising God physically and mentally.

Praising God is the most pivotal factor of peace of mind. The Quran emphasizes the importance of praising God and says:

«الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَ تَطْمَئِنُّ قُلُوبُهُمْ بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ أَلَا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ»

"Those who have believed and whose hearts are assured by the remembrance of Allāh. Unquestionably, by the remembrance of Allāh hearts are assured" (Ra'd: 28).

Anxiety has been found to have negative effects on mentality among cancer patients. Its consequences can be observed in the patients' personal and social health. On the contrary, many

physical and mental illnesses can be treated with peace of mind. Generally speaking, peace and anxiety play a very important role in an individual's and society's health and illness. The Quran introduces a great way to overcome struggles:

«أَلَا يَذْكُرُ اللَّهُ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ»

“Unquestionably, by the remembrance of Allāh hearts are assured” (Ra’d: 28)

Interpretations of this verse name some of the causes of anxiety and treatment strategies as follows: 1. Sometimes anxiety and fear are due to thinking of the dark and vague future, but faith in God Almighty who is always responsible for his creations can give humans peace of mind. 2. Sometimes anxiety and fear are a result of one's sins, but God forgives all and his kindness can bring peace of mind. 3. Sometimes people feel anxious about their weakness and inability against natural causes and internal and external enemies, but when praising God and his greatness; recognizing that God has the highest power and nothing can resist it, brings peace of mind. 4. Sometimes the root of anxiety is the feeling of emptiness, but one who believes in God and accepts that the evolutionary path of life is the ultimate goal, will no longer feel empty, nor will he be aimless. 5. Sometimes suspicions and absurd illusions are the causes of anxiety, but paying attention to God and His infinite grace, which is considered the duty of every believer, brings peace of mind³¹. According to verse 124 of Surah Al-Taha, avoiding praising God results in anxiety and regret, even if one has high financial means³².

Human life is always exposed to sorrow and grief due to various events, such as illness, poverty, and losing loved ones. These events sometimes attack the soul and psyche in such a way that some become incapable of facing them and gradually lean towards depression. One way to avoid these conditions is to praise and connect with God. Imam Sadegh (AS) has recommended that whenever sorrow and grief dominate you, praise God and say:

«لَا حَوْلَ وَلَا قُوَّةَ إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ»

“there is no power except with God”³³. Another narration states:

«لَا حَوْلَ وَلَا قُوَّةَ إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ»

“Say God removes seventy kinds of disasters, the least of which is sorrow and grief”³⁴. Cancer patients are recommended to lift their spirits and avoid depression by praising God.

3.3. Hope in God

Cancer diagnosis as its long-term treatments deprives the patient of the ability to enjoy life in many cases³⁷⁻³⁸, increase patients' spiritual needs³⁹, leads to spiritual distress⁴⁰, and results in suffering from a lack of any purpose, value, and meaning⁴¹.

Lin and Bauer-Wu believe that by reducing spiritual stress along with spiritual interventions, patients can adapt to their illness and be more empowered in the final stages of the disease⁴². Studies show that attention to spiritual distress is directly related to life quality while struggling with cancer⁴³⁻⁴⁷.

Despair can kill the patient and hope for a cure reduces the amount of suffering and consequences of the disease. In addition, it gives the power to overcome the disease and accelerate treatment. Therefore, a physician's duty, especially in the case of life-threatening diseases, is to strengthen the patient's mood and help build hope. The best way to accomplish this is to strengthen religious attitudes, trust in God, and belief in the fact that God is the true physician and he is capable of curing and healing all illnesses and pain; because God Almighty wants the best for human beings.

Hope plays an important role in mental health. Hope gives meaning to life, and when facing problems, misfortunes, sufferings, and sorrows, it prevents psychological collapse and domination of despair. Without hope, life is meaningless, effort is unreasonable, and anxiety and depression are justified as they lead to dark and ambiguous thoughts about the future⁴⁸.

3.4. Patience

One of the most recommended topics in Islam is patience. Patience refers to patience in hardships, patience on what the intellect and the Shari'ah demand⁴⁹. According to Imam Ali (AS) patience leads to deprivation and peace of mind. He also states: “With patience and good faith, all sorrows will end”⁵⁰. Imam Baqir (AS) mentions: “with patience during difficulties; God Almighty honors him and places him in Paradise with the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and the Ahl al-Bayt (AS):

«أَبِي جَعْفَرِ الْبَاقِرِ (ع) مَنْ صَبَرَ عَلَى مُصِيبَةٍ زَادَهُ اللَّهُ عِزًّا عَلَى عِزِّهِ وَ أَدْخَلَهُ جَنَّتهِ
مَعَ مُحَمَّدٍ وَ أَهْلِ بَيْتِهِ»⁵¹

Thinking about the reward of patience brings peace of mind and removes mental stress⁵². Religious experts recommend that cancer patients follow doctors' instructions, but they should also pay attention to the fact that the doctor is a means of treating the patient by God and he should seek God's help for real treatment. On this basis, if the patient recovers, he is thankful to God, and even if he does not regain his health for any reason, he knows that according to Islamic thought, disease and struggles are a way God forgives sins and a means to enter paradise; a place free from any kind of disease.

Therefore, cancer patients with a strong religious belief have the ability to treat their disease in this world and live in paradise in the hereafter, and are far less prone to mental illnesses such as stress, anxiety, fear and depression than cancer patients who do not believe in the unseen and God's religion.

4. Conclusion

Contemplation in the universe indicates the fact that in addition to material causes, spiritual factors are also effective in worldly affairs. While receiving help from practitioners and medicine, one must not neglect God and praising his greatness, as striving to use these spiritual causes is necessary. Hence, religious teachings recommend to praise God Almighty (dhikr) and request from him (prayer) and have faith in God for treating illness. The effects of prayer and praise have been proven by experimental and laboratory research on different patients. Prayer, praise, hope, and patience are not only comforting, but they help improve patients' mentality and personality, even if they do not fully recover.

Acknowledgment

The authors clarify that they are not part of or affiliated with any organization or entity that has a financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter. This includes honoraria, educational grants, participation in speakers' bureaus, membership, employment, consulting, stock ownership, or other equity interest, expert testimony, or patent-licensing arrangements.

Source of Funding.

This study has no financial support

Conflict of interest

None.

Financial support

None.

Ethics statement

None

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