

Shaping Strength Through Shared Paths: The Lived Experiences of Oncology Patients in Palliative Support Group Interventions

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of oncology patients participating in palliative support group programs using an exploratory qualitative design grounded in Edmund Husserl's descriptive phenomenology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine adult cancer patients receiving or completing advanced cancer treatment and palliative care in Taguig City, Philippines. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step thematic method, ensuring rigor through member checking and peer debriefing. Five key themes emerged: transformative fellowship, hope and emotional resilience, shared responsibility, redefined strength and optimism, and vulnerability through seeking support. Findings revealed that participation reduced emotional isolation, enhanced coping, and helped patients redefine strength by accepting support. The study highlights the value of structured support groups in addressing emotional, relational, and existential needs beyond medical treatment. It provides a foundation for developing research-based palliative support programs and recommends integrating structured psychosocial support into standard oncology care.

Keywords: *Oncology patients, palliative care, support group interventions, lived experiences, emotional resilience, vulnerability, coping strategies, shared burden-bearing*

INTRODUCTION

Cancer fundamentally alters the lives of individuals far beyond the physical dimension. From the moment of diagnosis, patients will contend not only with the demands of medical treatment but also with the emotional and psychological weight of living with a life-threatening disease. Hence, this study aimed to explore the experiences of oncology patients participating in palliative support groups and to gain a deeper understanding of how these groups influenced their emotional well-being, coping processes, interpersonal relationships, and overall cancer journey in a private hospital in Taguig City.

Statement of the Problem

This research explored the impact of involvement in palliative support groups on the emotional health, coping mechanisms, relationships, and general experiences of cancer patients in both public and private hospitals in Taguig City.

Central Question

What are the lived experiences of oncology patients participating in a palliative support group?

Sub-questions

1. How do oncology patients describe their experiences participating in a palliative support group?

2. How do oncology patients perceive the influence of their participation in palliative support groups on their emotional well-being and coping processes?
3. How does the oncology patients' participation affect their relationships and experiences of support from their family, friends and other fellow patients?
4. What meanings do oncology patients attribute to their palliative support group participation?
5. What challenges and recommendations do oncology patients encounter and may suggest during their participation within their palliative support group?

Scope and Delimitations

This phenomenological study centered on the lived experiences and viewpoints of cancer patients participating in palliative support groups at a private hospital in Taguig City, Philippines. The researchers selected a sample of nine participants who meet specific inclusion, exclusion, and withdrawal criteria to ensure a clear focus. This research involved adult cancer patients (18+) from support groups in Taguig City who could communicate effectively in English or Filipino, were mentally able to provide consent, and were in stable physical condition.

Theoretical Framework

This study combined *Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping*, *Cobb's Social Support Theory*, and *Beck's Cognitive Theory* to investigate the coping, social, and cognitive experiences of cancer patients in palliative support groups. Collectively, these frameworks illustrate how group interventions assist patients in coping with stress, forming connections, and cultivating adaptive viewpoints.

Conceptual Framework

Following the Input-Process-Output (IPO) model, the research incorporated oncology patients' demographic information, coping strategies, and experiences with support groups into a qualitative phenomenological examination and thematic analysis. This analytical approach uncovered key themes related to the participants' life experiences to ultimately create a research-informed program for improving palliative support groups.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research examined the experiences of cancer patients in palliative support groups and their effects on emotional health, coping mechanisms, relationships, and the overall cancer experience.

Research Design

This research used an exploratory qualitative design that implements a descriptive Husserlian phenomenological method to examine the experiences of nine oncology patients involved in palliative support groups in Taguig City. Using a 12-item semi-structured interview guide and implementing researcher bracketing to reduce bias, this approach sought to systematically document the fundamental meanings and emotional effects of these supportive interventions on the patients' overall experiences with cancer.

Research Steps

The research commenced with a literature review to create a basis on oncology patient experiences, palliative care, and interventions from support groups. It analyzed pertinent research, concepts, and methods in palliative oncology assistance.

Data Collection and Sample Selection

Nine adult cancer patients participating in palliative support groups in Taguig City were chosen using purposive sampling. Following ethical approval and informed consent, confidential semi-structured interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached.

Data Analysis Methods

This research employed Colaizzi's seven-step method for thematic analysis, highlighting significant statements and themes derived from participants' experiences. Member checking was utilized to confirm that the results truly reflected their viewpoints.

Research Hypotheses and Validation

The interview guide created by the researcher was approved by palliative care specialists and tested with oncology patients not involved in the study to confirm clarity and cultural appropriateness. Methodological triangulation and member checking were utilized to enhance the instrument's reliability and qualitative rigor.

Study Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Approved by the Ethical Review Board of Saint Bernadette of Lourdes College, this study strictly upheld human research standards by securing voluntary informed consent, protecting participant privacy with pseudonyms, and safeguarding well-being through criteria-driven selection and emotional support protocols.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SOP 1. How do oncology patients describe their experiences participating in a palliative support group?

Support-Group Participation as Transformative Companionship: Through an authentic, safe environment characterized by mutual understanding, participants are empowered to openly express vulnerability and build meaningful connections that cultivate long-term emotional resilience (Ziegler et al., 2022 & Zhang et al., 2022).

SOP 2. How do oncology patients perceive the influence of their participation in palliative support groups on their emotional well-being and coping processes?

Hope, Belonging, and Emotional Resilience: This result corresponds with recent literature on peer support, showing that mutual understanding and common experiences significantly reduce feelings of isolation, improve psychosocial well-being, and enable patients to face the uncertainties associated with cancer. (Kiemen et al., 2023 & Hemming et al., 2024)

SOP 3. How does the oncology patients' participation affect their relationships and experiences of support from their family, friends and other fellow patients?

Relational openness and shared burden-bearing: Based on the gathered and analyzed data, relational openness in palliative support groups enables shared burden-sharing, effectively converting personal suffering into a communal experience of empathy and mutual support. Supported by research on posttraumatic growth (Almeida et al., 2022 & Vrontaras et al., 2023), this cooperative setting encourages significant cognitive restructuring and beneficial psychological adjustment, allowing oncology patients to develop resilience and personal development through mutual peer assistance.

SOP 4. What meanings do oncology patients attribute to their palliative support group participation?

Redefining strength and hope: Consistent with current research on peer support and meaning-making interventions, these results illustrate that palliative support groups improve psychological empowerment, self-efficacy, and emotional resilience in cancer patients. Importantly, this research builds on existing studies by demonstrating how these relational environments help participants to comprehensively reinterpret their experiences, facilitating a transition from solitary endurance and self-criticism to a positive framework of collective vulnerability, appreciation, and hope grounded in meaning.

SOP 5. What challenges and recommendations do oncology patients encounter and may suggest during their participation within their palliative support group?

Permission to be vulnerable and seek support: Result of this study validates that psychosocial treatments encourage secure settings that enhance emotional transparency, compassion, and social bonds among people with cancer. (Jablotschkin et al., 2022) Also, it importantly deepens these insights by outlining the internal changes participants undergo as they actively transition from self-isolation to accepting vulnerability and seeking support as positive, adaptive coping strategies (Hemming et al., 2024 & Vrontaras et al., 2023)

SUMMARY

Utilizing Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method, this research revealed that palliative support groups meet the emotional, relational, psychological, and existential requirements of oncology patients via five developing themes. Involvement nurtured resilience, significant relationships, and a reimagining of strength as accepting vulnerability, turning the cancer journey into one of collective growth and comprehensive healing.

CONCLUSIONS

Palliative support groups offer vital psychosocial assistance by promoting companionship, emotional comfort, and significant connections that improve patient welfare. By sharing experiences, these groups assist oncology patients in cultivating hope, resilience, and a refreshed sense of purpose, while minimizing loneliness and promoting vulnerability. Support groups enhance clinical treatments by meeting the psychological, social, and existential needs that are crucial for complete cancer care.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends incorporating structured palliative support groups within oncology services, involving healthcare professionals, nurses, families, and caregivers to enhance patient access and emotional health. Future research should investigate the lasting impacts of these groups, taking into account caregiver experiences, online interventions, and facilitator viewpoints.

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AI DECLARATION STATEMENT

This research discloses the restricted application of artificial intelligence tools solely for literature review and initial drafting. No participant data that could be sensitive was utilized, and every piece of AI-generated content was examined manually to guarantee precision and adherence to ethical standards.

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