

Is the spiritual life of cancer patients a resource to be taken into account by professional caregivers from the time of diagnosis?

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ABSTRACT

Background and aim. Spiritual life can be defined as the search for personal contact with the transcendent. Careful assessment of spiritual life can help to value its importance to cancer patients from the moment of their diagnosis.

Methods. This is a cross-sectional study. Two hundred fifty-seven patients undergoing cancer treatment filled in the validated Italian version of the Systems of Belief Inventory (SBI-15R). Patients were also asked to attribute themselves to one of the following, mutually exclusive categories: believer and churchgoer, believer but no churchgoer, and non-believer.

Results. Five patients did not report their religious stance and were therefore excluded from the analysis. Of the remaining 252 patients, 49% declared to be believers and churchgoers, 43% believers but not churchgoers, and 8% non-believers. Of the 20 cancer patients who declared not to have a religious faith, 7 patients agreed with the statement that they felt certain that God exists in some form, and 4 had experienced peace of mind through prayer and meditation. Almost all of the patients who declared to have a religious faith and to be churchgoers explicitly affirmed to have been helped by prayer and meditation in coping with their illness. Among believer churchgoers, only 30% declared to seek out the religious or spiritual community when they needed help.

Conclusions. A large proportion of cancer patients find themselves involved with the search for a personal contact with the transcendent, also beyond any specific religious affiliation. These spiritual issues may be important even when they are not expressed as participation in religious rituals or adherence to specific religious beliefs. On the other hand, participation in religious rituals often implies the need for a personal spiritual life, both through those rituals and beyond them, as through personal prayer and meditation. These results ask for more attention on the part of professionals towards spiritual resources among cancer patients. It might be appropriate to look systematically for these resources from the moment of the diagnosis, through the sensitive administration of an easy and valid assessment tool like the SBI-15R.

Key words: religion, spirituality, cancer patients, spiritual assessment.

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