

# Meaning of Illness and Spirituality in Ovarian Cancer Survivors

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**Purpose/Objectives:** To describe spirituality and meaning of illness in survivors of ovarian cancer.

**Design:** Ethnographic study based on seven years of natural correspondence among survivors of ovarian cancer and a support newsletter.

**Sample:** 21,806 letters, cards, and e-mails received from survivors of ovarian cancer from 1994–2000.

**Methods:** Analysis was based on the Quality of Life (QOL) Ovarian Cancer Instrument. Data were bracketed and assigned within a table according to QOL themes.

**Main Research Variables:** Spirituality, meaning, QOL, and cancer survivorship.

**Findings:** Spirituality was relied on heavily as a coping mechanism, as well as a method of deriving meaning from the cancer experience. Data from survivors of ovarian cancer validated previously established meaning in cancer themes and identified eight new themes specific to meaning in ovarian cancer survivorship.

**Conclusions:** The nature of ovarian cancer implicates specific characteristics that alter the meaning of QOL and survivorship. Spirituality is an important component of QOL and contributes to the process of deriving meaning from the ovarian cancer experience.

**Implications for Nursing:** Knowledge of the unique survivorship issues of patients with ovarian cancer can enable nurses to improve their care for these women.

## Key Points . . .

- ▶ Spirituality is relied on heavily as a coping mechanism, as well as a method of deriving meaning from the ovarian cancer experience.
- ▶ A diagnosis of ovarian cancer is characterized by specific factors that alter the meaning of quality of life and cancer survivorship.
- ▶ Nurses must be aware of the unique survivorship issues that women with ovarian cancer face, in addition to general survivorship concerns.

meaning has been described as an effort to understand events, why they have happened, and their impact on an individual's life. Patients with cancer struggle with questions of "Why me?" including perspectives on what caused cancer to occur and what the purpose for the experience could be (Coward, 1997).

Spirituality has been described as an aspect of quality of life (QOL) for patients with cancer that encompasses not only religiosity but other dimensions such as hopefulness, transcendence, and purpose (Burton, 1998; Ferrell, 1996). Spirituality is linked to life meaning, and previous literature has described the importance of spirituality as a component of deriving meaning from cancer. Finding meaning in cancer through spirituality and other aspects of life helps patients and their families to cope and maintain a sense of hopefulness (Taylor, 1998).

The process of deriving meaning in illness also has been described as assisting individuals with recognizing positive outcomes from negative experiences, such as seeing the positive changes in life that may result from a cancer diagnosis (Ferrans, 1994; Ferrell, Taylor, Sattler, Fowler, & Cheyney, 1993). A goal of oncology nursing is to promote patients' search for meaning as a means of restoring integrity to lives and a sense of equilibrium despite the disruption of life-threatening illness (O'Connor, 1998). This article reports on research

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An ovarian cancer diagnosis will bring distinct fears, changes, and uncertainties for the 23,400 women predicted to be diagnosed in annually. As the deadliest of the gynecologic cancers, ovarian cancer claims the lives of almost 14,000 women each year (Jemal, Thomas, Murray, & Thun, 2002). Characterized by subtle symptoms, ovarian cancer commonly is diagnosed in the late stages of disease, when the five-year survival rate is only 35%. Although early-stage diagnosis has a five-year survival rate of more than 90%, no reliable screening methods are available to promote early detection (Trimble, 1994). As the number of more effective treatments has increased, so has the number of women who survive the disease without recurrence for two years or longer. Survivors who recover from the onslaught of this aggressive disease can begin to decipher meaning from their experience with cancer.

The concept of meaning has been a focus in oncology literature for the past decade, as nurses have come to understand the life-altering experience of cancer (Brown-Saltzman, 1994; Coward, 1990). The process of deriving meaning from the cancer journey includes elements of evaluating relationships, beliefs about life and death, spirituality, and exploring the significance of life events (Ferrell & Dean, 1995). The search for