Meaning of the Experience of Spirituality at the End of Life

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Background: One of life’s most vulnerable phases is that experienced at the end of life, with potential for despair and hopelessness. Incorporating or deepening one’s spirituality may lessen this potential. Spirituality may be one of the most important components of end of life care. Purpose: Investigators sought to describe the meaning of the experience of spirituality at the end of life as experienced by those receiving hospice care, informed and shaped by their remembered experiences of spirituality throughout their lifetimes.

Design/Methods: This phenomenological study followed van Manen’s (1997) framework. Participants were initially asked to complete written lifelines of their spiritual journeys throughout their lives as a reflective aid for subsequent audiotaped unstructured interviews. Verbatim interview transcripts were coded and themes identified to interpret the essence of the lived experience of spirituality at the end of life. Findings: Eleven Midwest hospice patients participated in this study. The meaning of the lived experience of spirituality at the end of life was framed within the spirituality lived throughout one’s life, including major themes of Connectedness, Spiritual Life Moments, Pick up the Pieces and Move On, and Religion “Matters.” Conclusions: Identified themes seemed to describe the lived experience of spirituality for this group of elderly hospice patients. Using a structured life review was valuable in reflecting on the experience of spirituality at the end of life. Finally, clinicians need to remain vigilant to spiritual issues at the end of life and researchers need continued focus on end of life spirituality.