

European Network of Research on Religion, Spirituality and Health

Newsletter April 2014

Volume 9 • No. 1

Editorial

Dear colleagues, dear friends

There is an ongoing debate on the interpretation of the terms “Religion” and “Spirituality”. A Swedish survey, conducted by Fereshteh Ahmadi and colleagues, shows a rather surprising result. However oneself or religious specialists understand the terms, health care professionals need to be aware that patients may have a different interpretation of “Religion” and “Spirituality”!

Fereshteh Ahmadi will also be present at the 4th European Conference on Religion, Spirituality and Health in Malta, May 22-24, 2014 (see www.ecrsh.eu). We warmly invite you to participate in the upcoming ECRSH Conference which again will be a great gathering of researchers and clinicians in the field. Up to now we have already more than 150 registrations. In the program you find many well known European and International keynote and symposia speakers. Visit the updated conference website (www.ecrsh.eu) and register.

Take also note of the Pre-conference Research Workshop with Prof. Harold G. Koenig and European experts as Prof. Arndt Büssing, Prof. Niels Ch. Hvidt, Dr. Constantin Klein and Dr. René Hefti (same website!). There are still a few slots left.

Further announcements can be found at the end of this newsletter. Please let us know about your conferences, projects and publications. Just send an e-mail to info@rish.ch and the information will be shared.

*Stefan Rademacher, PhD
René Hefti, MD*

Topic

Nature as the Most Important Coping Strategy among Cancer Patients in Sweden - A Survey

Fereshteh Ahmadi & Nader Ahmadi

Introduction

In order to investigate the presence of religious and spiritually-oriented coping strategies in a mainly secular context, a qualitative study was conducted (Ahmadi 2006) among 51 cancer patients in Sweden where the social majority do not consider themselves religious. A striking result of this study concerned nature as a means of spiritual coping. Informants identified nature as an effective factor in dealing with the emotional and psychological problems associated with cancer. Based on the results of this research, a survey study was conducted to examine the extent to which these results might be applicable to a wider population of cancer patients. Besides the questions relating to the aforementioned qualitative study, the RCOPE questionnaire designed by K. Pargament (Pargament et al. 2000) was referenced when designing the questionnaire. The aim of this survey study was to confirm the previous result concerning the role of the nature as the most important coping strategy among cancer patients in Sweden.

Method

The data was gathered by SKOP, a professional data gathering agency. SKOP used several cancer organisations, among them the Swedish Union for Ileostomy-, Colostomy-, and Urostomy-Operated Persons (ILCO), Blood Cancer Association (Blodcancerförbundet), and the Breast Cancer National Organisation (BRO). Most respondents (61%) belong to the BRO's register, a fifth (19%) belong to Blood Cancer Association's register, and 20% belong to register of ILCO. The survey was conducted as a postal questionnaire. No reminder letter was sent out. Data collection was conducted from March to May 2011.

The study sample consists of 2417 cancer patients of whom 79% are women and 21% are men. The study consists of three age groups: 18–59 years old, 60–69 years old, and 70+ years old. The reason behind this distribution is, that almost a third (29%) of those who responded to the survey are 59 years old or younger. The highest proportion of respondents (38%) are aged between 60 and 69 years while one-third (33%) are aged 70 or older.

Results

The results show that nature has been the most important coping method among cancer patients in Sweden.

The highest mean value (2.9) is the factor ‘nature has been an important resource to you so that you could deal with your illnesses’. Two out of three respondents (68%) affirm that this method helped them feel significantly better during or after illness. The second highest average (2.8) is the factor ‘listening to “natural music” (birdsong and the wind)’. Two out of three respondents (66%) answered that this coping method significantly helped them feel better during illness. The third highest average (2.7) is the factor ‘to walk or engage in any activity outdoors gives you a spiritual sense’. This survey concerning the role of nature as the most important coping method for cancer patients confirms the result obtained from the previous qualitative studies.

Besides, the results of the quantitative study indicate that few informants used religious coping methods, as informants were inclined to trust their own abilities to solve problems more than other sources of power, such as God or a religious authority. This result may be partly because of the dominance of secularism in Swedish society and the strong position individualism plays in Swedish culture, which fosters the idea that individuals have the responsibility of tackling their own problems. The interpretation of the results of the present study suggests that a large number of informants perceived a sacred value in nature. The timeliness and immensity of nature—the fact that whatever happens in

the world, nature will still be there keeping its pace—have had a calming and consoling effect for the severely ill informants in this study. Nature grants a feeling of security when everything else is chaotic. By sanctifying nature as a timeless object, the informants find a spiritual feeling that functions as a therapy in their encounter with cancer. The prominent position of nature in Swedish ways of thinking and culture might explain why experiences with natural environments play such a central role in coping. That informants perceive a sacred value in nature can also be explained by considering the fact that studies have shown that people living in Sweden are spiritual rather than religious. These since church practices and other religious activities have declined drastically in Sweden during the past decades, perhaps even before the mid-twentieth century (Ahmadi 2006, Pettersson and Riis 1994, Sundback 1994, Gustavsson 1985). Religiosity in Sweden has moved towards a subjective, inwardly directed phenomenon with few public attributes (Sundback 1994: 139).

Discussion

The present quantitative study confirms the result obtained in the previous qualitative study concerning the use of nature as a predominant coping method with cancer. As mentioned above, two important tendencies among people in Sweden have presumably influenced their choice of nature as a coping method. These tendencies include seeking spiritual closeness with God or a supreme force and seeking a natural romanticism that makes nature an available source for coping. One factor that may explain the above-mentioned tendencies is the impact of culture and ways of thinking on how individuals deal with their problems, i.e. tendency towards Spirituality and tendency towards natural romanticism

Based on the results of this study, nature and the possibilities that being in the nature and relating to nature offer cancer patients for coping with their illness should be taken more seriously by health care providers, especially those who deal with the therapy of psychological problem that cancer patients face in different phases, such as diagnosis, treatment, and post-treatment periods. In general, more attention should be devoted to the less conventional therapeutic methods for patients, such as creating possibilities for such patients to come into contact with nature. Well-designed, health-promoting gardens within the clinics, with the possibility for patients to be

engaged in gardening, meditation, or just having the chance to feel the earth, in addition to the presence of plants and birdsongs are among examples of using nature to answer the spiritual needs of the patients. This study confirms that these needs are important for people dealing with a serious life crisis.

References

- Ahmadi, F. (2006): *Culture, religion and spirituality in coping: The example of cancer patients in Sweden*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.
- Gustavsson, A. (Ed.) (1985): *Religiösa Väckerörelser i Norden Under 1800-och 1900-Tal- en (Religious revivalist movement in nordic countries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries)*. Paper presented at the symposium "Religious Revival Movements in the Nordic Countries during the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries". Centrum för religionsetnologisk forskning, Lund.
- Pargament, K. I., Koenig, H. G., Perez, L. M. (2000): *The many methods of religious coping: Development and initial variation of the RCOPE*. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 56, 519–543.
- Pettersson, T., Riis, O. (Eds.) (1994): *Scandinavian values, religion and morality in the Nordic countries*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.
- Sundback, S. (1994): *Nation and gender reflected in Scandinavian religiousness*. In T. Pettersson, O. Riis (Eds.): *Scandinavian Values. Religion and Morality in the Nordic Countries* (pp. 129–150). Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

For more information see the full publication: Ahmadi F, Ahmadi N.: Nature as the Most Important Coping Strategy Among Cancer Patients: A Swedish Survey. *J Relig Health*. 2013 Dec 22. (<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10943-013-9810-2>)

Correspondence:

Fereshteh Ahmadi
Professor in Sociology
Department of Social Work
and Psychology
Faculty of Health
and Occupational Studies
University of Gävle
Sweden
Email: faw@hig.se

Announcements

Publications

Elements of Culture and Mental Health: Critical Questions for Clinicians
Edited by Kamaldeep Bhui
www.rcpsych.ac.uk/usefulresources/publications/books/rcpp/9781908020499.aspx

Neuroscience, Psychology and Religion
Malcolm Jeeves/Warren S. Brown
<http://templetonpress.org/content/neuro-science-psychology-andreligion-0>

Meetings & Conferences

"Spirituality in a Challenging World"
3rd International Conference of the British Association for the Study of Spirituality,
May 19-21,
Ashridge House, Hertfordshire (UK)
www.ashridge.org.uk

"Integrating Religion/Spirituality into Clinical Practice: Focus on Health Care Professionals"

4th European Conference on Religion, Spirituality and Health ECRSH14,
May 22-24,
University of Malta/
Mater Dei Hospital (Malta)
www.ecrsh.eu



Pre-conference Research Workshop with Harold G. Koenig and European experts
May 18-21,
University of Malta
info@rish.ch

Faith-Based Nursing Conference
June 16-19, Marion, IN (USA)
www.indwes.edu/Nursing-Innovations

Impressum

This Newsletter is published by the Research Institute for Spirituality and Health, Langenthal

Editorial board: René Hefti, Stefan Rademacher

RISH - Research Institute for Spirituality and Health
Weissensteinstrasse 30
CH-4900 Langenthal / Switzerland
Phone +41 (0) 62 919 22 11
Fax +41 (0) 62 919 22 00
info@rish.ch / www.rish.ch