

Original Article

Crystallization of Spiritual Awakening in Patients with COVID-19: A Hermeneutic Study

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Abstract

Background: World health organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) a public health emergency in January 2020, and on March 11, 2020, the organization called it a pandemic. Despite causing problems, the COVID-19 epidemic leads to the spiritual and existential transformation of people. The phenomenology of the lived spiritual experiences of patients with a history of COVID-19 was the aim of this research.

Materials and Methods: This qualitative study was conducted with a hermeneutic phenomenology approach. Data was collected between November 2022 and May 2023. The data were collected with a semi-structured in-depth interview with 14 qualified patients, and the interviews were implemented and analyzed with the phenomenological approach of Dickelman et al., 1989. Data collection and analysis were done simultaneously.

Results: The analysis of data related to 4 patients with a history of COVID-19 in the age range of 39 to 79 who had a history of hospitalization in a Hospital in Tehran, the capital city of Iran, showed that their spiritual changes can be divided into three themes of spiritual emotions, spiritual knowledge and spiritual growth and excellence and a structural pattern of crystallization of spiritual awakening.

Conclusion: According to the results, the period of illness has helped their growth and excellence; their flexibility and deeper understanding of their place in the world changed their attitudes and values and caused their personal growth and excellence. The research results emphasize the role of spirituality in providing knowledge, insight, and increasing spiritual knowledge to patients.

Keywords: COVID-19, Hermeneutic phenomenology, Lived experience, Spirituality

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Introduction

World health organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) a public health emergency in January 2020 and a pandemic on

March 11, 2020. The number of people infected with this virus has reached 690 million and 366 thousand 779. In Iran, the number of infected people is 7 million, 612 thousand 280, and 146 thousand 290 people have died^{1,2}. This disease not only causes public health concerns but

also causes several psychological diseases, including anxiety, fear, depression, labeling, avoidance behaviors, irritability, sleep disorders, and PTSD³.

The coronavirus epidemic has shown that man's intellect and science are suffering from false pride, the ways and methods of the modern world are suffering from fundamental problems, and returning to spirituality is the main lesson that should be learned from this sinister event that the COVID-19 epidemic, despite causing problems, leads to the spiritual and existential transformation of people^{4,5}.

Corona is the deadliest thing that humanity has seen in the last century. Corona can be terrifying and create an apocalyptic atmosphere. Perhaps from now on, the type of crises will change completely, and the crises that question man's existence and the meaning of his presence in the world will be the major crises that await our species. Corona will also change the relationship between man and ontology. A kind of biological (bi-philosophical) medical ontology, where our Life is tied to our existence, and it is our Life that defines our existence, which quickly reminds people of the concept of God's medicine. Levin's body throws. Regardless of ontology, religious beliefs have many real consequences in people's lives^{6, 7}. Pandemics can even change civilizations' faces, potentially impacting people's daily lives and bringing them to a "suspension"^{8,9}.

In the current global situation where the number of deaths caused by COVID-19 is published daily, spirituality can be a good shelter in societies that are facing the spread of this disease. For a long time, epidemiologists have sought to answer whether spirituality and religion are related to mortality and health. However, for those who have answered this question in the affirmative, most internal medicine experts have a positive attitude toward spirituality¹⁰⁻¹².

A literature review revealed that a limited number of qualitative studies were published on spirituality in acute conditions, such as COVID-19. Therefore, considering the importance of this crisis, this research seeks to analyze the lived spiritual experiences of patients with a history of COVID-19.

Methods

This research used the phenomenological approach of Heideggerian hermeneutics to gain a new understanding of spiritual lived experiences¹³. The

participants were 14 patients with a history of COVID-19 who were admitted to Imam Hossein Hospital in Tehran (Table 1). The criteria for entering this study were alertness and willingness to express one's experiences and feelings of religion not suffering from mental illnesses and cognitive disorders (according to the participant's hospital record).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data on the patients' spiritual experiences while hospitalized. Some of the questions were: "What did spirituality mean to you at that time?" and "How did you feel about spirituality when you were sick with COVID-19?" These interviews were virtual and face-to-face, with an average of 45 minutes. Virtual interviews were conducted based on patient requests and through phone calls. In this study, supplementary interviews were unnecessary, and the interview had the necessary richness. Data analysis was done based on the approach of Dickelman et al.¹⁴.

A set of criteria, validity, reliability, confirmability, and transferability, were used to ensure the accuracy and validity of the findings¹⁵. The findings were shared with the participants and one expert, who both had degrees in religious studies. To check the reliability of the findings, an external observer who was familiar with qualitative research but was not a member of the research group checked and confirmed the findings. Finally, to check the transferability, the findings were shared with two patients who were not participants but had a history of COVID-19, who confirmed the findings.

In this study, the following ethical considerations were considered: Obtaining permission to conduct research from the "ethics in research" committee of Islamic Azad University, Karaj branch (ethics code: IR.IAU.K.REC.1401.085), approval date: 8/30/2022. They are submitting a letter of introduction to Imam Hossein Hospital in Tehran and obtaining permission from the hospital directorate and infectious disease department directorate. Please introduce yourself to the participants in the study and explain the research objectives to them. They obtain informed consent from the participants and give them the right to

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of research participants.

Interviewee code	Sex	Age	Marital Status	Educational Status	Employment Status	Hospitalization period
1	F	54	M	D	UE	6
2	F	65	M	HS	UE	3
3	F	67	S	HS	UE	7
4	F	64	S	HS	UE	8
5	M	53	M	B	E	10
6	M	47	M	D	E	3
7	M	49	M	B	E	8
8	F	42	M	AD	E	34
9	F	55	S	HS	E	10
10	F	79	M	HS	UE	6
11	F	49	M	B	UE	8
12	M	57	M	B	E	9
13	F	62	M	D	UE	13
14	M	44	M	D	E	7

HS=High School; D=Diploma; B=Bachelor; AD=Associate Diploma; E=Employed; UE=Unemployed

decide to participate in the study, with the possibility of withdrawing at any stage. Assuring the participants about the confidentiality of the information and making the study results available if they wish.

Results

The data of this research was analyzed based on Dikelman's seven-step phenomenological method [26], and the following results were obtained. The data analysis related to 14 COVID-19 patients admitted to Imam Hossein Hospital in Tehran showed that the spiritual transformations of COVID-19 patients are made of three themes: spiritual emotions, spiritual knowledge, and spiritual growth and transcendence. One structural pattern is formed with the name of spiritual awakening, which combines these three themes (Table 2).

Theme 1, Spiritual emotions: The participants of this research experienced three categories of emotions: spiritual feelings, righteous responses to Life, and spiritual purification.

Sub-theme 1-1, Spiritual feelings: The participants experienced various emotions during this period. Some of them, by performing religious acts such as praying to imams, saying zikr, and reciting the Quran, felt calm. For example, participant number 3 says, [in that

situation] *"The salutations I used to send calmed me down"*.

Participant number 11 says: *"Look, both before and after, I think that God loves us so much that we came back, especially me. Because I went to the hospital with 70% lung infection. The situation was very bad, but God gave me a new life, and always I appreciate it"*.

Sub-theme 1-2, Righteous answers to Life: Most participants stated that during the coronavirus pandemic, they realized the value of things like Life, family, support of others, success in worship, and health, and they are grateful for having them. For example, Participant Number 9 says: *"But now that I think about what a difficult day I spent, I really thank God a thousand times, and the doctor's care made me feel better, and even now I am continuing my life"*.

Participant 8 says: *"Well, my faith did not have any problems from the beginning, and I accepted God. But now, I am more dependent on my family and appreciate them more. And the fear of losing them has increased a lot."*

Sub-theme 1-3, Spiritual purification: Most of the participants in the research stated that the disease of COVID-19 was associated with spiritual cultivation for them. They regret the missed opportunities. They regret their disobedience. They try to repent and have vowed for their recovery or asked others to vow for them.

Table 2: Classification of Semantic units and formation of themes and structural pattern.

Semantic units	Sub Themes	Themes	Structural Pattern
The feelings of inexpressibility, peace, receiving love from God, lightness, happiness, pleasure, hope, and perceived spiritual support	Spiritual feelings		
Being grateful for life, gratitude for the caregiver(s), gratitude for the opportunity to live again, gratitude for the success of worship, gratitude for health, gratitude to God	Righteous answers to life	Spiritual Emotions	
Regret for disobedience, regret for lost opportunities, vows, and sacrifices	Spiritual purification		
Seeing death close, seeing death as a divine blessing, fearing death	Death-thinking		
Having the originality of that world against this world, believing in the afterlife	Belief in the afterlife		
The importance of self-improvement, the value of a person depends on how he lives, the value of the human position	Spiritual self-awareness		
Communicating with God, being aware of receiving help in response to prayer, intercessory prayer, believing in God's benevolence, talking to God, witnessing God's deeds and actions, submitting to God's will, believing in God's existence.	God-awareness	Spiritual Knowledge	Spiritual Awakening
Believing that the world is a test place, the world's insignificance, past behaviors and actions' effect in recovery, believing in the weakness of man, believing in the mortality of man, seeing the results of actions, man is valuable next to the Imams, believing to be blessed	Spiritual reframing		
Finding purpose and meaning for life, developing spirituality, having a mission in the world	Finding purpose and meaning		
Caring about others and their suffering, serving others, trying to make others aware of the nature of life.	Voluntary service	Spiritual growth and transcendence	
Not repeating past mistakes, becoming humbler, changing behavior and lifestyle, changing morals, taking care of behavior and actions, trying to get closer to God, forgiving, observing more religious requirements, pilgrimage	Spiritual transformation		
A second chance at life, believing in a miracle for healing, living in the present moment, believing that everything is connected to God	Spiritual rebirth		

Participant number 4 says: *"Two of our relatives made a vow to me. The day I wanted to go to the hospital, I took off my ring and tied it to the crib. I am in Zainabiyah. I said, I will go to Imam Zaman. I said this ring is for you. I will go back".*

Participant number 1 says: *"I was more worried about my daughter. On the one hand, I was worried about myself. Because my hands were empty... I felt like I had nothing for that world. ...I was very scared. I kept saying that if I get caught, I'm sure I won't survive. But if God wills, He will take care of us. Otherwise, I'm not a good servant, I'm a bad servant of God."*

Theme 2, Spiritual knowledge: For most of the participants in this research, the COVID-19 disease has been associated with awareness, awakening, and spiritual insights. They have learned more about God, death, the hereafter, Life, and the world.

Sub-theme 2-1, Death-thinking: In most of the participants in this research, the COVID-19 disease has

led to their awareness of death. They felt death near them. Most of the participants have experienced the fear of death and some have realized the importance of death in Life. For example, Participant No. 1 says: *"I was very scared because I saw the death toll on TV... I was very scared. I said that if I get caught, I am sure that I will not survive."*

Participant number 7 says: *"I was in so much pain that I said to myself, God, if someone is in pain like me, death is a blessing for him because he will be relieved."*

Sub-theme 2-2, Belief in the afterlife: Believing that there is another world in front of the material world, having the originality of the non-material world, and believing in the afterlife are things that have been frequently mentioned in the conversations of the participants in this research. In other words, most participants stated that the period of illness made them believe in the afterlife and the other world.

Participant number 4 says about this: *"Because I have*

been to this world before and came back, now I know that everything is true. Nothing is a lie. It does not mean that the world is a lie, everything is true."

Participant No. 1 says about this: *"On the one hand, I was worried about myself. Because my hands were empty, I felt that I had nothing for that world."*

Sub-theme 2-3, Spiritual self-awareness: For some of the participants in this research, the COVID-19 disease has been associated with knowledge and awareness about humans, their place and value, how they live, and the importance of self-improvement. For example, Participant Number 16 says: *"Of course, a person is not worthless, when he lives, he should value himself and help others and not oppress. The world is worthless. He should be well- Let's think, not evil."*

Participant number 14 says about this: *"A series of behaviors such as ignorance, as well as the financial losses that a person sees, all of these go hand in hand, so that a person is more towards Spirituality should go. Man should know that there is nothing better than that man should go towards his own self-improvement."*

Sub-theme 2-4, God-awareness: Most of the participants have experienced the presence of God during their illness. Among the most repeated sub-themes of knowing God, we can mention these: communicating and talking with God, hoping for God's mercy and help, submitting to God's will, seeing God as a witness to one's actions, being aware of receiving Help in answering prayers and supplications of absence or intercession. For example, participant number 8 says about this: *"I feel that I got closer to God, and if I ask God for something, I see that after a while he really gave me that thing. Previously I didn't have this feeling and I didn't know God so close to me... God exists, and He cares about me. It was a push to turn from the bad path. I think He wanted to show that He exists."*

Participant number 2 says: *"God must look after man so that he can get better, otherwise I have no life at all."*

Theme 3, Spiritual growth and transcendence: All the participants in this research stated that the period of illness and recovery from it caused their growth and excellence. They have been given a second chance to live. This has caused a change in their lifestyle and behavior, and they care more about others.

Sub-theme 3-1, Spiritual reframing: The disease of COVID-19 has been associated with the revision of patients' beliefs about the world and its mortality, the

value of man and his weakness and incapacity, the connection of everything with God, the impact of behavior and actions in Life, and the value of man next to imams. For example, participant number 14 says: *"Look, a person realizes the futility of Life when the closest person in his Life loses his friend. We surround ourselves around this in vain. We go around the world and tire ourselves."*

Participant number 5 says: *"[During this illness] I was reminded that people are much weaker than they think. Sometimes people are proud of themselves. And then he realizes that there is no news, and he can fall with a simple disease. It becomes less than a person's claim and becomes more earthy."*

Sub-theme 3-2, Finding purpose and meaning: For some patients, the COVID-19 disease has been associated with more spiritual awakening. In such a way that they have understood that they have been given a second chance to live because they have a mission in this world. They try to find a purpose and meaning for their lives. For example, participant No. 13 says: *"I don't know. To be honest, I always tell my children that I must have done something in this world." that God has brought me back to this world. I mean, I have the same feeling and I think like this. I don't know if you believe that every human being comes to this world for a reason or not? I believe that something must be done. I gave it back."*

Participant 8 says: *"I feel that I got closer to God. I didn't know God so close to me, but I don't know why those events, which were a storm in my opinion, suddenly came to my Life. For a while, my Life completely fell apart. I was away from my family and children."*

Sub-theme 3-3, Voluntary service: For some participants, the COVID-19 disease has been associated with caring for others and their suffering and serving them and trying to make them aware of the nature of Life. For example, participant 7 says about this: *"Being a Muslim is not about prayer and fasting. These things are a duty, but being a Muslim is not to hurt people. To serve people and be a servant of people. First is family and relatives and let's serve those close to us and then be far away and be good-natured."*

Participant number 11 says: *"... I tell my wife's mother not to be greedy. If it is going to happen, it will happen. To this extent, I can help and guide them. I want to*

influence them too."

Sub-theme 3-4, Spiritual transformation: All the participants believe that the disease has led to a change in their lifestyle, ethics, and behavior so that they try not to repeat the mistakes of the past. Morally, they have become humbler, more forgiving, and more convinced. They are careful about their actions and behavior and try to get closer to God and observe religious requirements more. For example, participant number 4 says about this: *"Now, if anyone comes to my house and likes anything, I say, God bless you. I don't eat the food I make without my neighbors at all. The things of the world are of no value to me at all. It makes no difference to me. Only that I can pray and worship and be able to serve the people."*

Participant number 5 says: *"After these events, a person tries to do more things that are pleasing to God and follow God's orders and advice and live closer to God. Be it."*

Sub-theme 3-5, Spiritual rebirth: Most participants believe that their recovery is a miracle. They have been given a second chance to live. Therefore, one should live in the present moment and the past and future have become less important for them. For example, Participant number 8 says: *"Even after I got better, the doctors told me that we didn't think you would be even one percent better... Miraculously, you back to Life."*

Participant number 10 says: *"Just as the doctors say, I am alive with a miracle. That is, I have thought that every time I turn to Imam Hossein, I will be healed."*

Structural pattern: The structural pattern of intertwining the six main themes of this study is obtained. The findings showed that the participants, relying on a superior force and due to contracting the disease of COVID-19 and going through a period of severe illness and suffering, a spiritual awakening has crystallized in them, and they have a better relationship with God. They have gained more insight into themselves, the world, others, and the hereafter. The participants in this research, with the experience of spiritual knowledge and emotions such as peace, left behind the world's appearances and could look beyond the illness to the spiritual dimension, have faith and hope, and strive to become a better person.

Discussion

Spiritual Emotions: Referring to the Bible, James, Schmidt, and Stockley¹⁶ consider a spiritual personality to be one whose spiritual feelings are the normal center of his Life. The participants in this research have experienced feelings such as inexpressibility, peace, and spiritual support. Mistur et al.¹⁷ showed that some participants talked about different feelings, including regret.

Spiritual Knowledge: As a result of the spiritual attention to the unseen by resorting to religion and its teachings, it becomes better and more complete, and religion helps man to broaden the scope of his thought and understand the basics. The participants saw death as imminent. In this situation, people pray more than before and ask God for forgiveness and health. The participants have gained new attitudes about death and the other world. Marchica et al.¹⁸ state that spirituality reduces the fear of death and strengthens the belief in Life after death. According to believers, death is a transition to another dimension.

Spiritual self-awareness is a person's belief in God and the world, moral values and standards, and life issues, such as illness and trouble, based on religious spiritual patterns. Marchica et al.¹⁸ reported that several participants said their increased awareness and mindfulness were some of the most significant changes in their spiritual journey.

God awareness is beyond the concept of theology that is, knowing, paying attention, and feeling the presence of God, connecting and belonging to Him, and continuing the unbroken relationship with God. Zohairi et al.¹⁹ showed that the spiritual care team and patients consider life events and sufferings as spiritual experiences.

Spiritual Growth and Transcendence: The participants believed that the world was a test place and saw this disease as a divine test. The participants believe in a positive spiritual framework that people see the results of their actions. Azad-Bakht et al.²⁰ concluded that spiritual beliefs help people by finding a new meaning in Life to overcome their confusion and cognitive disorder in the face of injuries and unfortunate events and post-trauma development to experience harm.

Voluntary service is a spiritual activity that greatly benefits those who receive volunteer services and those who do it²¹. The findings are in line with

Corpuz's research²². Perhaps the most interesting point of this research was the service of one of the participants after a partial recovery, not the treatment staff, clergy, or other volunteers, to other sufferers, which was not found in the relevant literature review and is unique.

Spirituality can change people. Some authors call this transformation spiritual transformation. Spiritual rebirth is a transformative process that seeks to dissolve the egoic self. Mistur et al.¹⁷ have pointed out that the conditions of COVID-19 disrupted the processes of individuation due to the loss of independence. In contrast, by revealing inner conflicts and spiritual questions, the processes of spiritual individuation escalated. Spiritual transformation is positively predicted by several factors, including finding meaning, having a secure attachment to God, and community support.

Conclusion

Considering that the spiritual lived experience of COVID-19 patients can be different depending on the cultural and religious contexts, it is suggested that this research be done with a sample group from different cities of Iran, especially cities with other religious groups (such as other religious minorities). Considering that the families of the patients and the treatment staff play a significant role in all kinds of social support, it is suggested that the spiritual dimensions and Spiritual needs of patients' families and medical staff should be researched.

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Conflict of interest

The authors further declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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